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With the exception of a few females working as carnival sideshow attractions, women have historically been an invisible part of the body modification industry. However, recently women have begun making a significant contribution to this industry, as they are becoming more modified and are more often choosing to work as modifiers (Mifflin, 1997). Most of the discourse surrounding body modification has focused on the male experience. Rather than positioning women's involvement in body modification as a location for personal and creative expression, body modification has been understood via male-oriented conceptualizations of the field, thereby compromising the possibility of alternative examinations of what modifications mean for the modified female.

In this study, contemporary tattooing and body piercing practices are understood as lived experience and are framed by the concept of female writing (Cixous, 1976). By situating women's experiences as both modified and modifiers within an understanding of body modification as a deliberate and creative act of dressing the body, tattooing and body piercing become modes of communication through which lived experience is understood. An ethnographic methodology, including in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) and participant-observation, comprised the research design for this study. The four female participants: Wendi, Jenn, Amy, and Lacie, work as piercers, tattoo artists, and shop managers in the body modification industry. Personal narratives were developed for each participant based on interview responses. Commonalities and differences surfacing within and across these narratives were then used to construct a thematic interpretation of

their lived experiences as body modifiers (van Manen, 1990).

Within the thematic interpretation, three conceptual areas are used to articulate body modification as lived experience: *Self-expression*, *Creation*, and *Profession*. Each conceptual area works to explicate the larger issues surfacing within the narratives that are important to understanding the link between the individual's lived experience and that of the women as a group. A third level of interpretation was then developed from the thematic interpretation: theorizing body modification as female writing.

In this study, women's experiences are placed at the center of an exploration of tattooing and body piercing. In so doing, this study provides an alternative understanding of body modification, and thereby addresses a gap in knowledge that currently exists. Through their modifications and their work as modifiers, the four women use tattooing and body piercing to dress their bodies in unique ways, ways that were found to be important acts of both self-expression and consumption. Further research on women and body modification is needed in order to deepen our understanding of how the dressed, and particularly the modified, body can be used to explore lived experience.

BEYOND THE TATTOOED LADY: EXPLORING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN
THE BODY MODIFICATION INDUSTRY

by

Kathryn A. Eason

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To my parents, George and Gaye, my sister, Susan, and my husband, Mike. Each of you has been an endless source of support throughout this process. You have served to inspire me to strive for success through your actions and wisdom, and without that, I would never have come this far.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of
The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Body modification is an integral part of dressing the body. Archaeological evidence suggests that humans have been tattooing the body for more than 7500 years, and that tattooing has been a part of cultural systems of dress for nearly 4500 years (Mifflin, 1997; Rubin, 1988; Sanders, 1988b). From these and other early historical roots, a myriad of body modification practices have developed throughout a wide range of cultural groups found in all regions of the world.

North America and Western Europe, like other areas, have a long history of body modification practices. In North America, nearly all the Native American cultures encountered by European colonists, from Mexico to Alaska, were said to practice some form of body modification (Ebensten, 1954). In Europe historical evidence suggests tattooing may have been practiced among the Picts, Celts, and German tribes during the period of the Roman conquest. Even among the ancient Greek and Roman cultures some evidence of tattooing and body piercing exists (Caplan, 2000; Ebensten, 1954). From the Dark Ages to the Renaissance there was a decline in body modification in Western Europe. However, during the colonialist expansion there was a resurgence of interest as cultures that used these practices in their forms of dress were encountered (Ebensten, 1954). As sailors, pilgrims, and explorers returned home from their experiences in

foreign lands they brought with them the tales of the people they had seen, and often the marks they had received abroad.

During the following 200+ years a contemporary form of body modification, particularly tattooing and body piercing, developed throughout Western Europe and the United States. The history of such body modification in these societies is often described through the men who participated in the practice; however, equally important are the stories of the women who have chosen to incorporate body modification in their dress practices. As contemporary body modification practices have developed in North America and Western Europe, the level of women's participation has, in turn, increased. Currently, more than half of all new tattooees are women (Sever, 2003). In addition, an increasing number of women are choosing to become professionals working within the body modification industry. Reports suggest that anywhere from 10 to 30% of all professionals are women (Mifflin, 1997; Wojcik, 1995).

This research is an exploration of the experiences of four women who are participating in contemporary body modification as professionals within the body modification industry. In this study, the experiences of the modifiers being studied serves as the locus for gaining a reflexive understanding of women's expression and evolution of identity through the creative act of involvement in body modification. The guiding question of the research is: *What is it like to be a woman working in the body modification industry?* This central question is framed by specific relationships that are critical to exploring women's experiences within the body modification industry. First, it is important to consider the level of co-creation of modification by the participants. This

level of co-creation is negotiated through the dual concepts of expression through participating in a unique dress act and the commercial setting in which modification often occurs, thereby making it a consumptive act. Additionally, the women are not only modifiers performing tattoos and piercings on clients but also are actively involved in modifying their own bodies. Second, the socially-situated position of these women as modifiers within an industry that, though accepting women in increasing numbers, is still male-dominated, must also be considered.

Background

Body Modification Defined

In order to fully explore the nature of women's contemporary body modification experiences, it is important to have an understanding of the positioning of this practice within the context of dress practices as a whole. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) define dress as “body modifications or supplements that a particular group makes available to its members” (p. 2), and identify three distinct types of dress: body modifications, body enclosures, and attachments to the body or to body enclosures. Body modifications are defined as any temporary or permanent changes to the body including such alterations to the color, texture, or shape of the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Body supplements, in contrast include yet go beyond the simple idea of “clothing,” therefore, this definition of dress accounts for all processes used to manage one’s appearance (Kaiser, 1997) and specifically includes the body itself via modifications. As a result, the body becomes the ground, or basis, of dress.

Atkinson (2003) organizes types of body modifications, referred to as body projects, into four categories: (a) camouflaging, (b) extending, (c) adapting, and (d) redesigning. It is the fourth group, redesigning, with which this research is concerned. Redesigning is defined as the “reconstruct(ion) of the body in lasting ways (e.g., contours of the flesh, durability of organs, strength of joints and ligaments, shape or integrity of bone structures, and pigmentation of the skin” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 25). Sanders (1989) further delineates permanent alterations and modifications into decorative and non-decorative (i.e., medical) functions. Decorative modifications include body sculpture, infibulation (piercing), cicatrization (scarification), and tattooing that are typically connected to “permanent statuses, life-long social connections, or conceptions of beauty...” (Sanders, 1989, p. 6).

In his theory of the extended self, Belk (1988) states that the more closely we engage with an object, the more of an embodiment of the self it becomes. It is believed that permanent elective body modifications, such as tattooing and body piercing, will be more highly valued than other unmodified parts of the body (Belk, 1988; Sanders, 1988b). Many aspects of body modification, such as hair and nail color, though applied directly to the body, are considered to be important expressions of the self. Due to their impermanent nature, however, they are not considered to be as highly significant representations of self as are more permanent body modifications (Belk, 1988).

Body Modification in Contemporary Culture

This research is an exploration of the experiences of women as they engage in contemporary body modification practices in their daily lives. For the purposes of this

exploration, “contemporary” society is defined as those practices developing out of European colonialist expansion. This is in contrast to more “traditional” forms of modification often indicative of non-Western cultures. A number of studies have found that contemporary body modification practices are similar throughout the United States, Canada, and Western Europe (e.g., Benson, 2000; DeMello, 2000; Ebensten, 1954; Harris Interactive, 2003). Therefore, this research focuses on tattooing and body piercing as contemporary forms of body modification with a particular focus on the United States.

Popular, permanent acts of contemporary body modification, specifically commercial tattooing and body piercing, are isolated from other forms of body modification because of their unique place in society. Tattooing and piercing, unlike cosmetic surgery, do not aim to conform the body to cultural ideals and are more often seen as means for determining a distinct identity via an entertainment practice (Gans, 2000; Kaiser, 1997). It is the use of tattooing and piercing as consumer-driven personal identity markers that also differentiates contemporary modification practices from more traditional practices. Traditional practices oftentimes link an individual with the larger cultural whole through significant body modification experiences within the community as compared to creating a difference, or mark of uniqueness, between the individual and the group.

Bell (1999) differentiates between the experience of having tattoos and being a tattooed person. Having tattoos, she suggests, means having a limited number of modifications that are easily covered, thereby allowing the wearer to “pass” in general society. In contrast, being tattooed is a state in which most of the body is modified to the

point that covering up is not an option. As having modifications becomes increasingly common this distinction has blurred. However, this distinction still remains important among tattooed individuals. Often this distinction will result in changes in social associations and groups with which tattooed people associate, in that those who are tattooed generally prefer the company of “tattooists and other tattooed people within the subculture, avoiding the stares and numerous questions of outsiders” (Bell, 1999, p. 56). The present research expands on Bell's notion of multiple levels in the acquisition of modifications by including body piercing along with tattoos. That is, instead of examining having versus being tattooed, this research is an exploration of the concept of having versus being modified. As will be discussed, the participants of this study are all modified individuals, with more than 50% of their bodies modified through a combination of tattoos and body piercings.

The Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework that allows for an exploration of concepts relevant to the understanding of contemporary body modification is developed based on phenomenological notions of experience. Merging three areas of inquiry together - embodiment, dress, and gender - the conceptual framework provides a context within which the participants' experiences can be understood. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, which places a heavy emphasis on the relation of the body to a sense-of-being-in-the-world, has proven to be particularly useful when discussing issues of the gendered body (Young, 2005) and the dressed body (Calefato, 2004), and therefore serves as a logical framework in which to place this research. Phenomenology, as a philosophy,

seeks to explore the connection between being and the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Merleau-Ponty in particular focuses on the perceptual nature of consciousness with regard to being. Consciousness, the world, and the body are combined and constantly engaging and perceiving each other. This perspective highlights the importance of the relationship between being-in-the-world and the spatial and temporal relationship between the body and a sense of being.

A number of researchers have drawn important connections between the body and dress practices. Warwick and Cavallaro (1998) discuss the status of dress practices as part of the construction of the body as an ever-evolving being in a natural state of change, moving from incompleteness to cultural completeness. Bordo (1993) critically examines the rise in eating disorders among women against the socio-political backdrop of patriarchal culture and post-industrial capitalism. Her perspective enables a critical review of these disorders within the larger context of such topics as: philosophical and religious views on the body; connections to other obsessive body practices that radically modify the body; and the continuity of the concept of 'normality' within culture.

Entwistle (2000b) considers the act of dressing to be “a subjective act of attending *to*...and is also an act of attention *with* the body” (p. 30). The relation of dress and the embodied self is framed by Davis (1992) as being metaphoric for cultural and individual identities, particularly in contemporary cultures. Dress is used by members of a culture to provide fashion symbols (Davis, 1992) or facilitate fashion discourses (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) in which individuals use dress in shifting and creative ways to express and play with their identity (Entwistle, 2000a).

The dressed body, as a living text, can serve as an important tool when examining gender roles within contemporary society. Women's bodies are sites for discipline and control through which the self is constructed (Maguire, 1993; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Shilling, 1997) according to dominant (male) ideals (Bordo, 1993; Howson, 2005). As more women are using tattooing as their chosen form of expression it becomes important to examine the nature of these body projects (Atkinson, 2002 & 2003). Body modification can serve to explicate changing roles and status of women throughout history and help to shed light on the nature of gender via the lens of the dressed body (Braunberger, 2000). A number of feminist scholars have researched the ways in which female bodies are used to express dominant patriarchal societal values (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Conboy et al., 1997; Howson, 2005). This bodily view of the world allows for a feminist perspective in research because it raises questions about gender that cannot be addressed when looking at the experiences of the mind alone (Grosz, 1994).

Purpose and Objectives

The goal of this research is to develop an in-depth understanding of the meaning of body modification through the experiences of four female professionals currently working in the industry. Each modifier is currently living in North Carolina and is employed as either a piercer or tattoo artist by a commercial body modification shop. The four women were selected from a larger group of women who participated in preliminary research that I conducted in the summer of 2006. The four participants in this study were selected based on their unique perspectives and backgrounds in body modification as well as the level of rapport that developed between myself and each participant.

This research provides an exploration of the experiences of four women within the body modification industry. In particular, women's experiences as modifiers, as co-creators of meaning, and the role of modification in identity construction are examined. Grounding for further exploration of the importance of dress in the creation and expression of identity is also established.

Through the exploration of the lived experience of the four women in this research a number of different objectives are addressed. Facilitated by the use of an interpretive methodology, these objectives include: (a) to explore the experiences of female modifiers as tattooists and piercers within the body modification industry, (b) to investigate their experiences as co-creators of meaning, and (c) to examine the connections between the creation of meaning through modification and identity development. By using an interpretive epistemological and methodological framework, a deeper understanding of the female experience of body modification can be achieved.

In interpretive research, as in this research, the methods, methodology, and underlying theoretical considerations comprise a particular “research nexus” or paradigm, which is intentionally used to amend the silencing of the body and lived experience that has occurred in more traditional, positivistic modes of inquiry (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). As such, I utilize methods within the research process that help to uncover the meaning of modification experiences within the lives of the four participants. The methods include a demographic questionnaire, interviews, and participant-observation, all of which are used in combination to collect their experiences as “texts.” These texts were gathered during fieldwork conducted in North Carolina from December 2006

through February 2007, during which time I spent approximately five days talking with each modifier. Upon completion of the fieldwork I then continued written communication with each artist in order to foster her continued participation throughout the interpretation process.

The correspondence between myself and the modifiers resulted in three levels of interpretation. Each level is developed based on the modifiers' texts of experience and relates to the three objectives of the study outlined above. The first level of interpretation is the personal narrative of each modifier. Developed from the first level, the second level consists of a thematic interpretation of the experiences among and across the four women as a group. The third level of interpretation consists of theorizing and further discussion as to the relationships between their experiences and their involvement in the body modification industry.

This study is presented as a story, one that tells of the experiences of the four modifiers. Through the use of an interpretive methodological framework, the texts of experience are gathered and interpreted through a dialogue between myself and the modifiers. However, my role as the interpreter is an important constant throughout the development of this study. Therefore, my intentions shape the research as a whole; from the topical areas discussed within the interviews to the structuring of the interpretation, the meaning associated with the modifiers' experiences is largely shaped by my understanding of the questions central to the research. The recognition of the role that my voice plays within the representation and interpretation of the modifiers' experiences is a

crucial part of the methodology and is further addressed regarding each stage of the research and interpretation process.

Experience, and specifically that of women, is an essential principle of this study, and is the starting point for the research process. Therefore, I started the thematic interpretation from the personal narratives of each modifier, relying on her perspective of her lived experience and focusing on her involvement in body modification as the lens through which she understands her world. This approach requires learning about each woman's relationship with body modification through an exploration of how she became both modified and a modifier, and how she understands herself and her involvement in the body modification industry. These issues then lead to a discussion of how the experiences of the four women can be combined to comprise an integrated understanding of their experiences, and what these experiences say about the position of women within the contemporary body modification industry. Therefore, in the third level of interpretation I theorize their experiences with body modification as a site for the development of female writing.

The methodology used in this study is informed in part by Cixous' (1976) theoretical notion of *l'écriture féminine* or female writing. Female writing is considered to be a way of expressing the unique and individual experiences of women which can be revealed through interpretive inquiry and is closely related to postmodern feminist thought. In particular, Grosz (1990, 1994, 1995, 2005) has posited the importance of gendered experience in her theory of sexual difference. For Grosz, sexual difference focuses on a gendered notion of lived experience, one through which knowledge and

understanding begins with bodily experience, and that this experience occurs outside of dominant patriarchal interpretations of lived experience. Cixous (1976) further expands this view of the gendered position of the body and posits that through bodily expression women can rewrite their position relative to patriarchal cultural norms through the use of female writing.

Body modification is used as a basis for exploring the experiences of the modifiers in this study. Although each of the modifier's experiences within the industry differs, as a whole they provide an avenue for understanding issues of experience pertinent to the body modification industry. That is, similarities exist among and across the experiences of the four women that point to the implications of the positioning of women's bodies within social discourse for understanding the modified body. By theorizing about the experiences of these four female modifiers, their experiences can be used to explore the gendered nature of body modification as lived experience.

Scope and Significance of the Study

Our sense of being is intricately related to the way our bodies interpret the world around us. The boundary of our body, that which separates us and jointly places us in the world, will affect how we understand the world. The relation of the body, and in this case, the dressed body, to a sense of being has been suggested by a number of researchers (e.g., Cazeaux, 2000; Entwistle, 2000b; Merleau-Ponty, 1976). Our bodily sensations, our senses, are the means through which we experience the world (Cazeaux, 2000). All understanding and consciousness is articulated through one's body. Participation in the world, as expressed through the body, *is* consciousness in its broadest sense. Furthering

Merleau-Ponty's (1976) argument, Entwistle (2000b) explains “rather than being 'an object in the world' the body forms our 'point of view on the world'” (pp. 28-29).

Although increased commercialization and commodification of the body has occurred across gender lines, women's bodies are targeted more often and in more highly specific ways than men (Gillespie, 1996). Women's bodies have been modified and commodified through such practices as cosmetic surgery, to the point where radical alterations are presented as 'normal' types of female behavior (Gillespie, 1996). Calefato (2004) further discusses the importance of the relationship between production, exchange, and consumption in contemporary society, and how they have become one and the same.

Contemporary culture places an importance on the outward appearance of inner health (Featherstone, 2000). The appearance of the body becomes of central concern with modifications, whether temporary or permanent, taking place on a daily basis (Gillespie, 1996). The choice to make a permanent body modification, such as tattooing, may be motivated by desires for beauty, group membership, and re/construction and definition (or presentation) of the self to oneself and the outside world (Csikzentmyhalyi & Roachberg-Halton, 1981; Watson, 1998). The increasing popularity of body modification practices like tattooing has helped shape a complex discourse surrounding the level of collaboration women actually experience in the manipulation of their bodies. Because the female body has so often been a site of control, the body itself may therefore be the most appropriate location to react to this discipline (Hardin, 1999).

Broadly, this study examines the experiences of women using body modification as means of self-expression. Specifically, modified women who are also modifiers are seen as instrumental to the co-construction of meaning and identity through dress. Although this research is specific to understanding the experiences of four women working as body modifiers, the experiences shared add to a more complete understanding of the co-creation of identity through the process of modifying the body. This, in turn, adds to the general knowledge base of the use of dress practices in the construction of identity and the self.

Throughout this research, the term “body modification” is used to refer to the practice of receiving contemporary tattoos and body piercings. In addition, an important distinction between the terms modified and modifier also needs to be made. The term “modified” is used to discuss individuals who possess body modifications, while “modifier” refers to the act of performing a modification. Distinction between these terms is used as a device to group and identify common experiential threads among the participants. Connecting the experiences of the four women who are modified and also work as modifiers allows for an expanded exploration of the particular experiences of these women with respect to their involvement in the co-creation of expression and identity through body modification.

Ultimately, by exploring the experiences of these four women, this research provides an avenue for further study of the development of identity and self through the co-constructed process of dressing the body. In the next chapter, the exploration of these women's experiences is further framed by a historical, social, and cultural investigation of

the use of body modification as a means of dressing the body and, in turn, as a significant mode of communication and expression.

CHAPTER II

THE LITERATURE THE INFORMS THE INTERPRETATION

Although body modification practices are becoming increasingly common in contemporary culture, the study of this dress practice has remained relatively limited in the academic literature. In general, previous research on body modification has fallen into three areas: anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

Anthropological reviews of body modification practices, such as those by Brain (1979), Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (1992), Rubin (1988), and Featherstone (2000) review the history of ritualized “primitive” and “modern primitive” practices. These studies often trace the history of traditional modification practices back thousands of years. However, only a few (Atkinson, 2003; Caplan, 2000; Rubin, 1988) review the distinct development of contemporary body modification practices.

Psychological studies, like those conducted by DeMello (1993), Favazza (1996), Kent (1997), Scutt (1974), and others, have examined body modification practices in contemporary culture. These studies review the practice of body modification in terms of “self-mutilation” and possible tendencies toward criminal psychiatric disorders.

Also common in the academic literature on body modification practices are studies in the field of sociology. Sociological research often explores body modification through one of three research concepts: (a) as an act of social deviance, (b) as an occupation, and (c) as a form of political resistance (Atkinson, 2003, p. 55).

As introduced in the previous chapter, the central research question points to larger contextual issues of women, the body, and dress, and the implications they have for exploring the experiences of women body modifiers in the contemporary United States. In this chapter, I develop a framework linking together main ideas found in the literature pertaining to this exploration. To do this, the chapter is divided into two major parts: (a) exploring the historical development of body modification, and (b) theorizing the relationship between body modification and the gendered experience of the dressed body.

Within the first part of the literature review I summarize the historical development of body modification to examine women's position in the practice from both a traditional and contemporary perspective. A brief discussion of previous research suggesting shared motivations for both traditional and contemporary modifications is provided. I then move to examine possible motivations for traditional female modification practices, providing examples of various traditional modification styles used by women throughout history. This review creates the larger framework in which to examine both the similarities and differences in the development of contemporary body modification practices. In this review contemporary body modification practices are introduced through a brief history of European tattooing practices leading up to the era of colonialism in the late 18th century, when many scholars believe contemporary Euro-American body modification began as an independent practice. Paying particular attention to female involvement, contemporary body modification practices are then

reviewed throughout their 200+ year history. This review points to the degree to which the industry is male-dominated and illustrates the relatively recent inclusion of women.

In the second part of this chapter, “Theorizing the Body Modification Experience,” I examine women's relationship to body modification practices from a more theoretical point of view. I focus on the importance of the human bodily experience and how this is expressed through both the individual and social act of dressing the body. In addition, importance is placed on the relationship between the gendered body and daily bodily experience. Combined, these two points of view play an important role in understanding the gendered experience of dressing the body. I then explore the literature that examines the body modification experience, and in particular, that which provides an exploration of the female experience of body modification. Literature examining the experiences of modifiers, rather than those who have modifications, is then reviewed. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of exploring women's experiences as body modifiers for understanding the relationship between dress, gender, and lived experience.

Historical Development of Body Modification

Various forms of body decoration have been used throughout history as a basis for human expression and as an aid in the construction of human action and interaction (Shilling, 1997; Velliquette, Murray, & Creyer, 1998). Piercing, scarification, and tattooing may signify a wide variety of meanings that are, to a large degree, related to the culture practicing the modification. Research on traditional modification suggests practices signifying accomplishment (Girtton, 1988), group membership (Gathercole,

1988), and willingness to endure pain (Bohannon, 1988) as possible motivations for engaging in this form of dress.

Traditional Female Body Modification Practices

According to Sanders (1991) traditional tattooing practices among women fulfill three general purposes. Tattooing serves to: (a) define the wearer's cumulative identity in a permanent way, (b) identify membership in particular groups with shared activities and skills, and (c) provide a magical or protective purpose. Tattooing is one of the oldest forms of dress to be discovered by archaeologists (Bell, 1999). Extant archaeological finds date the oldest tattoo in a cultural environment from around 2500 B.C. on the body of an Egyptian priestess found in a tomb near Luxor. The 1991 discovery of a tattooed huntsman in the Italian Alps has since moved this date back an additional 3000 years.

Egyptian priestesses, like the one found in Luxor, were often tattooed. In Egypt, only women were tattooed, and generally this was used to identify dancers, singers, and priestesses. Particularly common were tattoos placed upon women in the service of the deity Bes, associated with recreation. Not only did such tattoos permanently and publicly identify these women, but they were also thought to provide magical protection (Sanders, 1991).

Geisha in 19th century Japan often had tattoos used as an identifier of their group status in society. These tattoos also served an aesthetic purpose, enhancing their sexuality, as it called attention to the differences between the male and female body (Hage, Harary, & Milicic, 2001; Sanders, 1991). During this time, a small number of

women in Japan also began to work as tattooists, though the field was generally considered to be a male one (Sanders, 1991).

As a form of group membership and identification, women's tattoos often communicated their marital status and family background. In New Zealand, the Maori *moko* was, and continues to be, practiced by both men and women. Men's tattooing is extensive and identifies the wearer's "social rank, lineage, honorable acts, special skills, and relationships" (Sanders, 1991, p. 148). Women's *moko* is typically less extensive, generally limited to the lips and chin. The designs tend to draw attention to skill sets, honoring "poets, weavers, teachers, and dyers of cloth" (Sanders, 1991, p. 149).

Because body modification calls attention to the physical differences between the sexes, it is, like other forms of alteration, linked to aesthetics and erotic appeal. A number of cultural uses of body modification are associated with sexual growth and development which make up a complex set of group specific meanings. In Samoa, only males were tattooed. Tattooing was seen as the female equivalent of childbirth or defloration, which was a public ritual among high-ranking girls (Hage, Harary, & Milicic, 2001). A Samoan proverb speaks to the important relationship between tattooing and childbirth,

Tupu le tane, ta le tatap

The man grows up and is tattooed

Tutu fafance, fanafanau

The woman grows up and she gives birth (Milner, 1969, p. 20 as cited in Hage, Harary, & Milicic, 2001).

In Papua on the island of Matua, women's tattoos were acquired throughout girlhood and adolescence, with the final tattoo signifying marital fidelity. The girl would

receive her first stomach designs around age ten. Later tattoos would be added on her face, back, arms, and upper chest, followed by the inner thighs and remainder of the chest area. Finally, upon marriage, a v-shaped design would be added to the chest area. Facial tattoos were particularly significant, as the extent of the tattooing denoted the wearer's social rank. However, like moko, the overall design was used to denote family honors and skills (Sanders, 1991).

Tattooing has been used extensively for the magical or protective properties it provides the tattooed. In Ponape and western Polynesia tattooing was said to have a divine origin. This was also true in Fiji, where due to its divine nature all tattooing experts were women (Hage, Harary, & Milicic, 2001). In Yemen, women tattooists typically inked the lower lips and chin, affording the wearer protection from physical ailments (Sanders, 1991). In Japan, Ainu women believed their facial tattoos provided them good health and fortune as well as guaranteeing entrance to the afterlife (Sanders, 1991). Women in Borneo were differently honored in the afterlife depending upon the extensiveness of their tattoos received while living. Those with more tattoos were more highly exalted, by being “allowed to gather pearls from the heavenly river, while (those) with only partial decorations were only permitted to watch” (Sanders, 1991, p. 150).

Development of Contemporary Body Modification Practices

Contemporary body modification practices vary widely from their traditional counterparts. Traditional tattooing practices are created as a structured language and are often comprised of thematically-linked and inherently meaningful pieces. Contemporary tattooing, in contrast, will generally include one or more designs on the body that tend to

be images of a variety of different things and often lack a sense of thematic completeness (Bell, 1999). For instance, traditional practices, such as Japanese body suits and Maori moko typically encompass several different images that are presented in a manner of specific meaning to both the individual and cultural group from which they originate. The use of tattooing as a mechanism for social construction and reproduction is a pivotal deviation in the use and development of contemporary from traditional tattooing. Pitts (2003) distinguishes between contemporary and traditional modifications, stating that contemporary Euro-American tattoos,

...do not reflect the traditional cosmology and are not socially 'functional,' and they have no socially stable meanings. Rather they (parasitically) simulate the images of non-Western cultures, and are often narcissistic attempts to address the...characteristic(s) of postmodern society, in which social attachments are temporary and fleeting and meanings are often ironic. (p. 33)

In addition, contemporary body modification differs from its traditional counterparts in that it has developed as a consumption-based practice. Traditional body modification practices are often used as rites of passage or to mark important cultural ties, and are performed by a designated member of the community, often an elder or shaman (Sanders, 1989). In contrast, for the entirety of contemporary body modification in Euro-America, tattoos and body piercings have been obtained through a commercial system where a modifier's services are exchanged for monetary value (Atkinson, 2003).

Throughout the history of tattooing in Western Europe and contemporary America, there has been no large-scale social reproduction through the use of tattooing, allowing for the European tattoo to be "free to roam at will...open(ing) itself (to a) variety

of appropriations and inversions” (Caplan, 2000, p. xv). Euro-American tattooing has developed with a considerably less structured system of meaning than many traditional tattoo practices used in other areas of the world.

Historically, the use of tattooing in Europe dates back to the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Celts. Tattooing in these cultures was mainly used for the marking of criminals and slaves as well as those considered property by the ruling members of the culture (Gustafson, 2000; Jones, 2000). Early Christians then inverted this practice, particularly in Celtic regions, to show servitude toward Christ (MacQuarrie, 2000). Historical evidence of tattooing in Western Europe continued in this manner until the Middle Ages, at which point there is very little extant historical evidence of the practice until the 18th century. However, as stated by Caplan (2000):

One should not read this long gap simply as a defect in the historical record, an empty space that can be made good or filled in by painstaking historical reparation...It is also...emblematic of the nomadic and contested status of the European tattoo itself, its character of always being in transit form or to the multiple horizons of a self-centered world, of circulating most actively on the margins where it is least visible. (p. xv)

Although body modification practices have their origins in traditional cultures, the development of Euro-American distinctions is important in the consideration of modern practices within contemporary cultures. The Anglo-Saxon or Celtic tattoo is considered the closest to a particular traditional marking in that it is thought to have originated among the ancient tribes of the British Isles, but it has experienced only brief periods of popularity throughout the contemporary history of tattooing (Bell, 1999). The evolution of Euro-American tattooing can largely be traced back to the earliest days of the

colonialist expansion of the late 18th century. It was during this time that the term tattoo developed out of the Polynesian word *tatau*, meaning “to prick”. Although evidence suggests that tattooing practices were in use in Western Europe long before this period, many scholars begin their historical review of contemporary Euro-American practices from this point.

The development of body modification practices in contemporary culture is highlighted by six periods in the expansion and popularity of tattooing and body piercing in Euro-America (see Table 1). The Colonialist Era of tattooing was characterized by the tattooing of colonizing seamen on exploratory voyages. Naval pioneers and explorers often documented the practices of “primitives” discovered during the colonizing of new lands. It also became increasingly popular for seamen to return home with a tattoo as a souvenir of foreign travels. As few women were involved in these voyages, there is little information in the literature on women's tattooing practices during this time. It was not until the mid-to-late 19th century that Euro-American tattooing became popular among women. During this period, the development of women's participation in tattooing is divided between two distinct groups: the aristocracy and carnival side show attractions (Mifflin, 1997). From the mid-1800s to the 1920s traveling circuses and carnivals became popular. During this period, slaves, captured or purchased on naval expeditions were billed as tattooed primitives and put on display for public entertainment. As naval servicemen came home from duty abroad, they would often work in carnivals, using their body modifications to enhance their tales of dangerous adventures in foreign lands.

Table 1: Development of Contemporary Body Modification Practices

1760s-1880s	Colonialist/Pioneer Era
1880s-1920s	Circus/Carnival Era
1920s-1950s	Working-class Era
1950-1970	Rebel Era (Dark Ages)
1970-1990	New Age Era (Renaissance)
1990-present	Supermarket Era

(Atkinson, 2003)

The appeal of primitives and servicemen soon began to wane among the public who increasingly craved more dramatic shows. This led to the introduction of women in carnival shows at the turn of the 20th century. The effect of the women in these shows was twofold, in that women challenged the previously masculine image of tattooing while simultaneously adding a pornographic dimension to the modification process due to the scandalous amount of skin they showed. Such effects have had a long term impact on the popular view of modifications as an act of social deviance (Atkinson, 2003).

During the late 19th century, a second group of women were also becoming tattooed: the aristocracy. By the end of the century, tattooing had gained faddish popularity, and members of the elite, including “Queen Olga of Sweden, Princess Weldemar of Denmark, Princess Anne of Bourbon-Parma, the Duchess of Marlborough, and Lady Churchill (Winston's mother)” were all rumored to have tattoos (Sanders, 1991, p. 150). The fad spread to the United States as well, where an 1897 article in the *New*

York World reported that as many as 75% of American society women were tattooed (as cited in Sanders, 1991). The fad of tattooing continued into the 1920s, when the discovery of the priestess in Luxor increased interest in the fashion (Mifflin, 1997; Sanders, 1991). During this time, positive associations with tattooing practices were limited to the social elite. Women of state who received tattoos were seen as brave and noble for going through the ordeal, which was believed to enhance their beauty (Armstrong, 1991; Hawkes, Senn & Thorn, 2004; Mifflin, 1997).

In the 1920s, in addition to decorative tattoo work, the cosmetic tattoo was developed specifically for female clientele. Much of the work done on women at this time consisted of darkening eyebrows and lashes and reddening lips and cheeks (Sanders, 1991). It is interesting to note that cosmetic tattooing was often advertised as a medical procedure conducted in women's homes resulting in a majority of this tattoo work being done without the full knowledge of the women participants (Mifflin, 1997).

Women did not begin tattooing clients until the early 1900s. Generally, these women were the wives and daughters of tattooists and were often heavily tattooed themselves, working as side show attractions at carnivals and fairs. They were trained by their male relatives, sometimes being allowed to color in outline work as a means of boosting sales. More importantly, they were trusted to keep the trade secrets of the shop that are normally shared during the traditional apprenticeship system of training (Mifflin, 1997).

During the Working-class Era, from the 1920s to the 1950s, tattooing and other forms of body modification became more popular within certain socio-economic strata.

With the increase in demand came a marked growth in the number of tattoo shops (or “parlors”) providing body modification services. Tattoo parlors could be found in all major cities, often located near pool halls and bars, and catered primarily to military servicemen, the working class, criminals, and social outcasts. It was during this period that the entrepreneurial shop owners began to develop a loosely defined structure of communication with one another. An artist-apprentice system of training became more formally developed, and “flash” (commercial tattoo designs for reproduced mass consumption) became a staple of most shops.

In the 1950s, the 20-year period known as the Rebel Era began. Often referred to as the “Dark Ages” of tattooing, this period was marked by the development of prison and gang tattooing. By the late 1960s, as a result of negative exposure from popular media, fear of modified individuals reached the level of “full-fledged moral panic” (DeMello, 2000, p. 38). Although the criminal member of the biker gang was the main cultural icon of tattooing for the period, a number of other marginalized groups also took to modification practices. Despite the wide variety of sub-cultures (e.g., urban youth gangs, Rockers, Modernists, Greasers, and Rock-a-billys in addition to prisoners and motorcycle gangs) that engaged in these modification practices with varying values and beliefs, they all drew on the sense of Otherness inherent in contemporary tattooing to eschew social norms of the time.

The Rebel Era had an enormous amount of impact on the cultural history of global body modification practices. Outside of the use of tattooing in the context of prisoners, body modification has been traditionally used as a “mark of inclusion” as a

“normative and culturally celebrated means of establishing one's status within a culture” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 41). However, by the 1970s, mainstream North America had come to define body modification as a deliberate act of social disobedience (Sanders, 1989).

In contrast, the New-Age Era, the 1970s through the 1990s, is often referred to as the “Renaissance” of contemporary body modification practices. During this period there was an explosion of interest in body modification practices. As the body became increasingly recognized as a central aspect of cultural display, an influx of clients and artists from mixed backgrounds became involved in body modification practices. During this period, the Neo-Primitives were arguably one of the most influential of the new groups interested in modifications. Neo-Primitives were concerned with the most primitive uses of body modification as symbolic acts of “cultural cohesion” and group identity (Atkinson, 2003). During this period, body modification practices took on a number of meanings depending on their usage, including as rites of passage, a marking of personal defense, the ability to endure pain, a challenge to Christian notions of beauty and sexuality, and as an exploration of alternative spirituality (Atkinson, 2003).

It was during this period that women began working as tattooists in increasing numbers. As tattooing began to expand from its earlier history and developed new aesthetics, tattooists' skills had to be such that they could produce the work being demanded. A growing number of tattooists received formal training in the arts in addition to the standard apprenticeships that are the historical basis of the field. Although difficult to break into, because most suppliers and tattooists were hesitant, if not loathe, to train a woman, a number of women were able to gain apprenticeships based on their artistic

talent. Female artists during this time were often sought out for their concern with the spiritual nature of tattoos. Also, their sensitivity to the placement and design of a tattoo in relation to the client's body in order to achieve a look that flowed with the contours of the body -- rather than simply being placed on the skin -- attracted prospective tattooees (Mifflin, 1997). Many women artists feminized nature imagery and art deco motifs to create their own distinctive designs. Since the 1970s a growing selection of feminist designs ranging from Tank Girls to butterflies and flowers has developed (Mifflin, 1997).

Currently, we are experiencing the Supermarket Era of body modification practices, which began in the 1990s. During this period, as interest in body modification practices has increased, the business of body modification has become a highly competitive part of the modern market economy. As a result, body modification practices have become increasingly diversified as consumers appreciate the individual choices and control they are allowed in the processes of modification consumption.

Today, within this growing subculture there are an increasing number of women participating in tattooing. According to Sever (2003) an estimated 16% of men and 15% of women are tattooed, with more than half of all new modifications being done on women (Velliquette, Murray, & Creyer, 1998). Along with the growing trend in women receiving body modifications is the increase in women giving them. Some studies suggest that 10-30% of all professionals are women (Mifflin, 1997; Wojcik, 1995). The annual Marked for Life tattoo convention, a gathering dedicated to women modifiers, celebrated its 12th anniversary in January 2007. All of this points to a need for understanding women's experiences within this growing industry.

Theorizing the Body Modification Experience

Dress practices, including body modification, are inherently meaningful to our shared understanding of the human condition. Tattooing and piercing are deeply meaningful insofar as they can serve as narratives for an individual's lived experience. However, though tattoos are often received for individual reasons or to display sub-cultural group affiliations, they are often viewed and experienced by the cultural whole. Because of this, body modification is, like all other experiences, inter-subjectively understood.

An essential element to ontological understanding of humanity is that our being "*exists as time*" (Hyde & Sargent, 1993, p. 124). Our experiential understanding is altered by the play of time and its relationship to the structured nature of our lives. According to Fink (1968) this play of time, though intricately related to our life, functions at a distance. Time subtly alters the understanding of our experiences, changing our world, our bodies, and therefore our sense of being. However, our understanding of time and our understanding of being can be challenged by the use of body modification. According to Merleau-Ponty's concept of subjectivity, the body is located in time and space and the self is located in the body (Entwistle, 2001). As dress is performed on the body, it is done so with the understanding of "the rules and norms of particular social spaces...orient(ing) oneself/body to the situation" (p. 45).

Body modification provides a unique perspective on this notion of time and spatiality. Due to the permanence of the marks, particularly if they are in a highly visible location, unlike supplements, modifications cannot be removed or put aside depending on

the social situation, thereby causing them to exist outside of a temporal understanding. However, body modification, particularly tattooing and body piercing, also carries the inscription of its history (MacKendrick, 1998). These marks encompass implicit meanings associated with the experience of receiving them and with the type of modification chosen. As a result, the relative permanence of such markings creates an outward display of personal history. Yet, modifications will age through scarring and fading, as the body itself ages. These markings therefore call attention to both the permanence of the modification and the naturally changing state of the human form.

The body provides a unique surface upon which cultural politics are often played out. Grosz (1994) considers the body “a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and outside, the public and the private, the self and the other, and all other binary pairs associated with mind/body opposition” (p. 20). Body modification exists in a unique location upon the body, as what Caplan (2000) refers to as a “double skin”. The modified surface “produces an exchange between interiority and exteriority...which is thus made available to carry the culturally specific meanings assigned to the fundamental distinction between interior and exterior” (p. xiii).

The Body and Dress

The dressed body can be used to sustain or address the collective mythologies culturally created about the body (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998). Specifically, the dressed body can often serve as a feature of the grotesque (Lachmann et al., 1988). Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of the body as a boundary in his examination of the carnival and grotesque. According to Lachmann et al. (1988) a Bakhtinian view allows “the

grotesque view of the world...the boundary between the body and world to be drawn in a different way than the 'natural' boundary allows” (p. 147) by exploring “everything that bursts, protrudes, and surfaces from the body, everything that seeks to escape the bodies limits” (Bakhtin cited in Calefato, 2004, p. 30). The idea of the grotesque is represented through the body itself. It is the body that can, through its performance, invert meanings associated with it. Through performances of the dressed body it is possible to interpret or invert not only the meaning of the dress act, but the experiences of the actor as well (Calefato, 2004). Body modification presents a particularly interesting area for exploring the nature of the dressed body as it “puts the entire surface of the body into play” (MacKendrick, 1998, p. 21) and explores bodily limits in a new way.

Dress serves as a site to examine the boundaries of the body as it is situated within the world. According to Entwistle (2001),

...the body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning while the body is a dynamic field which gives life and fullness...(lying) at the margins of the body and mark(ing) the boundary between self and other, individual and society. (p. 36)

Universally, the body must be dressed during all social interactions. Therefore, dress is an intimate part of the body and crucial to its state of being-in-the-world. Because of this relationship between dress, the body, and societal interaction, dress may be worn for a number of purposes (i.e., protection, adornment, etc.) but is ultimately an inherently communicative aspect of cultural communities (Entwistle, 2000a).

According to Calefato (2005), “clothes as conveyors of meaning...give shape to a system of objects in which the body finds the space for innumerable and complex

sensorial identities” (p. 3). Dress is a textual, embodied practice through which meaning can be communicated. However, a literal communication of meaning is often difficult through dress. Davis (1992) suggests that the language of dress should be considered as metaphorical, providing cultural cues and codes. Dress can serve to map out distinctions between and among different bodies such as class, gender, age, and group affiliations (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001). More than this, however, dress adds cultural meanings to the body, which are so deeply imbued with significance as to often be considered the body’s natural state. Dress, becomes important in the understanding of cultural groups, and can be considered “a crucial feature in the production of masculinity and femininity” as it “turns nature into culture, layering cultural meaning on the body” (Entwistle, 2000b, p. 43).

Embodiment and Gender

The interrelationship between the body and dress as a site of cultural development creates a space within which questions of sexual specificity and gender can be explored. Sexual difference, therefore, incorporates an understanding of how different bodies experience the notion of gender. Previously, many feminists have avoided examining ideas of sexual difference as,

...misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them in bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control. Women's corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes. (Grosz, 1994, p. 13)

However, despite previous readings, or lack thereof, of the female body, new understandings can be explored and used to gain a greater awareness of the subjective and gendered bodily experience.

A number of feminists are focused on understanding experiences as concerned with the lived body. Feminist theories of sexual difference consider the specific ways in which the body is an intricate part of cultural representation. In particular, these scholars are more “interested in the question of the cultural construction of subjectivity than in the materials out of which such a construct is forged” (Grosz, 1994, p. 17).

Grosz (2005) explains that the goal of sexual difference is to move beyond the “contained, represented, socialized ideal” (p. 171) of gender to explore the capacities of the sexes. According to Grosz (2005), sexual difference seeks to acknowledge two things:

...first, the failure of the past to provide space and time for women *as* women ... second, is the necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject’s relation to the world, to space and time, to be conceptualized in different ways, which in turn transform our conceptions to matter, subjectivity, and politics. (p. 173)

This difference is played out in a myriad of ways across a myriad of bodies that are both sexed and gendered. The difference between bodies occurs on a continuum, which can include those bodies that are representative of each sex, but can also include those bodies who do not necessarily fit into the created categories of biological sex, such as hermaphrodites who fit into both categories, or other individuals who fit into neither (Grosz, 1990). However, sexual difference is not the simple mapping of gender onto biologically neutral bodies, “but rather, a *social mapping* of the body tracing its

anatomical and physiological details by social representations” (Grosz, 1990, p. 244).

This understanding of sexual difference has important implications for lived experience because,

It implies a productive, *changeable*, non-fixed biological substratum mapped by a social, political and familial grid of practices and meanings. ... Masculinity and femininity are not simply social categories as it were externally or arbitrarily imposed on the subject’s sex. Masculine and feminine are necessarily related to the structure of the lived experience and meaning of bodies ... masculinity and femininity *mean different things* according to whether they are lived out on and experienced by male or female bodies. Gender is an effect of the body’s social morphology. What is mapped onto the body is not unaffected by the body onto which it is projected. (Grosz, 1990, p. 245)

Relying on a feminist understanding of sexual difference, Grosz (1994) examines the cultural inscriptions that constitute bodies as a site for acknowledging the contributions of women in “term(s) chosen by the women themselves” (p. xi). Bodies, within this conceptualization are not only considered in their pre-cultural state, but as significant discursive objects bound in a contested social, cultural existence. As Grosz (1994) further asserts,

... if women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or perhaps lack of it) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men's bodies and identities need to be articulated. (p. 19)

Despite other differences, women share sexual differences which affect their place in regards to social recognition and representation. Whether these differences are culturally

or biologically created, they require further study and exploration. Through this understanding new cultural markings and inscriptions can be created.

According to Butler (1990), the performative nature of gender creates stylized images of the male and female body. Bordo's (1993) essays serve to highlight the changing conceptions and experiences of the female body, and imagine the possibilities these experiences present. Moreover, a number of different critical theories have been presented as to how woman can overcome this cultural domination. For instance, in a collection of essays, Conboy et al. (1997), sought to explore the tension between lived bodily experience and culturally inscribed experiences that mediate the overall experience of being a woman through creatively exploring gender difference on the materiality of the body. Similarly, through a phenomenological lens, Howson's (2005) *Embodying Gender* further engages the concept of embodiment through gender, which she defines as seeking to "understand the relations and practices that give shape to women's lives and define, regulate, and mediate bodily practices" (p. 6).

Gender categorizations occur frequently in subcultural groups (Pomerantz et al., 2004). However, analyses of such subcultural groups rarely distinguish between the male and female experience; women are either mentioned as an afterthought or left out entirely. In her study of *Sk8er girls*, Pomerantz et al. (2004) explores feminism in the everyday situations of women who are members of subcultures. Seen as a subcultural mark, tattooing is often interpreted as a means of expression and belonging (DeMello, 1993), yet a gap exists with respect to our understanding of the significance of such marks for women, in that the forms they take are highly varied and their meanings

dependent upon the cultural context and time period in which they occur (Atkinson, 2002).

Body modification, in the form of tattooing and piercing, may continue to perpetuate the cultural ideal of a feminine form. Because these types of body modification draw attention to the female body, highlighting the female form, it is the conceptual equivalent to cosmetic surgery or other body projects like excessive dieting and corseting (Atkinson, 2002; Davis, 1992; Gillespie, 1996), forms which serve only to perpetuate and heighten cultural meanings already attached to women. That is, cosmetic surgery and corseting often serve to perpetuate ideals of female subordination and actively disempower women on a cultural level (Gillespie, 1998). Female body builders and women who participate in tattoo competitions often challenge the ideas of the traditional female body. However, unlike their male counterparts they are judged by a different set of rules, one which serves to reinforce dominant notions of the female body (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Mifflin, 1997). That is, as owners of modifications, women go from being natural to primitive and from existing as a sex object to being driven by lasciviousness (Braunberger, 2000; Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004).

The increasing popularity of body modification has helped to shape a complex discourse surrounding the level of collaboration women actually experience in the manipulation of their bodies. Because the body has so often been a site of control, the body itself may be the most appropriate place to react to this control (Hardin, 1999). Whether or not a woman's modification is a conscious mode of defiance, a disruption of the patriarchal codes imposed through society will occur. That is, through the

modification of the body, women can alter “*where* others look and what they'll see when they do” (MacKendrick, 1998, p. 5).

The Body Modification Experience

Both Rubin (1988) and Sanders (1989) examine the various aspects of the consumption process involved in contemporary body modification, and specifically tattooing. Clinton Sanders (1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1991) has regularly examined the contemporary occurrence of body modification in terms of commercial activities related to consumption, and explored the culturally specific, unique, and symbolic nature of tattoos within the context of modern commercial interactions. In particular, his research focuses on clarifying the definition of art as it relates to body modification, and the effect that its commercial nature has on this characterization.

In *Marks of Civilization*, Rubin (1988) interviewed North American tattoo artists in order to gain an understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles of those employed in the body modification industry. Rubin (1988) examines the debate between body modification as consumption good versus an art form, and is one of the few academic inquiries to examine the role of the modifier rather than the modified. Through interviews with participants, it was discovered that tattooists view themselves “as being involved in an activity oriented to consumer needs rather than their own needs as creators of fine art” (Rubin, 1988, p. 222). Tattooists were asked to describe common motivations for those seeking tattoos. These motivations were divided into, but not limited to, five categories including: (a) symbols of an interpersonal relationship, (b) participation in a

group, (c) representation of key interests and activities, (d) self-identity, and (e) decorative and/or aesthetic statements.

In *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*, Atkinson (2003) examines the phenomenon of Western tattooing among its enthusiasts, and focuses in particular on its use as a symbol of both personal identity and social communication. Atkinson discusses the use of techniques such as disclosure, justification, and representation in modern tattooing trends, and compares tattooing to broader body modification trends like cosmetic surgery, dieting, and piercing.

Body modification has also become tied to the fashion system, a system which is particularly invested in innovation. Fashion is founded on the notion of discarding old ideas and practices, not because they are no longer useful, but because the sign communicated is outdated (Calefato, 2004). The body itself, and in particular the female body, has become a site of such innovation and commodification, which can be altered, produced, and sold to the highest bidder.

Tattooing and body piercing practices exist in an interesting juxtaposition with the nature of consumerism. Many individuals seek body modification as an object of ornamentation, and more so recently as tattooing and piercing have become more “mainstream” or “trendy” modes of modifications (MacKendrick, 1998). However, despite the fashionable popularity of modifications, they still present a level of permanence that suggests a higher level of commitment to the modification than more temporary alterations to the body. In addition, women’s modification practices present an interesting form of rejection of the consumption of their own bodies. By denying the

traditional male standards of beauty in favor of creating their own, women are intentionally “devalue(ing) the commodified object of the masculine economy” of which they are a part (Hardin, 1999, p. 82). Tattooing and piercing are relatively permanent alterations in the face of the contemporary fashion system. As these modifications become a more “fashionable” act for women, the act itself may be altering and slowing the cycle of fashion.

According to MacKendrick (1998), “modification plays against the very destiny of anatomy...by bringing to bear all manner of artifice, changing the body, not just passing over the surface” (p. 21). Through the many layered meanings of tattooing and piercing as a dress act, individual and social knowledge of the body is challenged, not just in a physical sense, but in reference to the use of the body to explore understanding through the act of creation on the body. Modification occurs as an experiential process of being-in-the-world, not only as a process of bodily consumption, but in the very subversion of that understanding by experimenting with the boundary of the body itself.

Beyond the broader cultural meanings attached to body modification, alternative explanations of modification, especially tattooing and to a lesser degree piercing, do exist in the literature, and primarily with regard to their diffusion in contemporary cultures (Carroll & Anderson, 2002). In contemporary context the body may be used as a means of identification with a particular group, or, conversely as a statement of self-control or ownership (Carroll & Anderson, 2002; Sanders, 1988a). Body modification may also be used to differentiate between the individual and the mainstream, whether purely for artistic and/or aesthetic value (Sanders, 1988a, 1988b), or as a self-mutilatory behavior

(Jeffreys, 2000; Martin, 1997). The following is taken from one of the most exhaustive accounts of motivations for body modification in contemporary culture provided by Bell (1999) as found in *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos* (Steward, 1990):

decoration, herd instinct, narcissism, exhibitionism, possession, sadomasochism, rivalry, homosexuality, crypto-homosexuality, manhood initiation rite, masculine status, an existential act, compensation, imitation, compulsion, celebration, aliveness, non-conformity and rebellion, gang membership, fetishism, pastime, utilitarian, guilt and punishment, advertisement, sentimentality, bravado, braggadocio and wickedness, magic and totemism, religion, consecration, stigmata and the messiah complex, national and/or ethnic origins. (p. 45)

This list demonstrates the extensive and complex meanings associated with individual and group choices in body modification (Bell, 1999). Moreover, Scutt (1974) provides an extensive list of 14 possible motives for tattooing and other forms of marking the body including:

1. To camouflage an unclothed body when hunting.
2. To secure a place in heaven.
3. To ensure an easy passage through difficult phases in life, such as puberty and pregnancy.
4. To prevent disease and injury and acquire fertility
5. To propitiate malignant spirits at the time of death.
6. To acquire special characteristics through totemism and ancestor worship.
7. To acquire the special respect of the community to allow the individual to climb the social ladder, and to assist the retention of class privilege, e.g. by recording prowess on the field of battle, successful trading or fishing expeditions, etc.
8. To terrorize the enemy in the field of battle.
9. To make the body sexually interesting.
10. To express sentiment (patriotism, love, friendship, anti-authoritarianism).
11. To register incidents of personal interest, places visited, etc.
12. To achieve personal or group identity (primitive tribes, gangs, sailors).

13. To make money (circus side-shows).
14. To register important personal medical data, e.g. blood group. (p. 13)

Body modification has a rich history which has helped to develop the myriad of meanings ascribed to it across cultural contexts. Far from complete, the lists provided by Bell (1999) and Scutt (1974) point to the possibilities for multiple meanings of body modification, yet, while there are a number of masculine activities and motivations listed, those that might apply specifically to women are conspicuously absent. Mifflin (1997), in examining the history of women's tattooing in contemporary cultures, suggests that tattooing is different for women and writes,

for those who approach it with forethought and invest it with meaning...women who see it as an outward expression of their inner being – tattooing is a way of cutting into nature to create a living, breathing autobiography. Written on the skin – the very membrane that separates the self from the world – tattoos are diary entries and protective shields, conversation pieces and counter cultural totems, valentines to lovers and memorials to the dead. They celebrate ethnic pride and family unity; coming out, coming of age, marriage, divorce, pregnancy and menopause. They trumpet angry independence and fierce commitment. They herald erotic power and surge sexual shame. They're stabs at permanence in an age of transience and marks of individualism in a culture of mass production. Collectively, they compose a secret history of women grappling with body politics...women whose intensely personal yet provocatively public art poses a complicated challenge to the meaning of feminine beauty. (p. 178)

Women's tattoo practices still tend to be more about private display than those of their male counterparts. This may be due, in part, to the possibility that women remain more concerned with the publicly perceived unconventional nature of tattooing than men

(Sanders, 1991; Watson, 1998). Scutt (1974) expresses a more historical perspective on women's tattoo practices that has remained constant for decades,

The fair sex, in general, is not prone to acquiring tattoos...For other than those who have been institutionalized, few women approve of tattooing, let alone indulge in it. It would be fair to state that most women who possess tattoos gained them through their menfolk. (p. 143)

Women tend to define tattooing as a piece of “body jewelry” as a private decoration with personal meanings meant to be shared only with those with whom she has intimate contact (Sanders, 1991). Motivations for becoming tattooed are often discussed in rather abstract terms. However the design choice is usually made for a very specific reason, and is often related to a person's individual or social identity. Women in particular often choose designs for aesthetic reasons, in that they find the design to be particularly attractive (Sanders, 1988b).

Women involved in body modification can use their bodies in revolutionary ways to rewrite their place in society. By studying the consumption process undertaken by women engaged in body modification, a deeper understanding of women's experiences may be developed. Previously, the most studied aspect of the consumption of tattoos and piercings has been that of the final product – information gathered from individuals who have already received the modification. However, the entire process of consumption is a part of the dress act, and is important for understanding the nature of tattooing and piercing as it relates to women. Contemporary modifications allow women to choose their own bodily appearance, however the process itself may be of importance, as women create their own meanings during the entire modification experience.

Women as Modified

A number of researchers have focused on the acquisition of tattoos among women at varying stages of their developmental growth. Carroll and Anderson (2002) reviewed the use of tattooing and body piercing among adolescent girls (ages 15 to 18) with regard to self-esteem and body investment. Results found that anger reaction, depression, and a feeling sub-scale of the body investment to be correlated with the total number of predicted piercings and tattoos. Because these girls were 18 and under, generally below the legal age for tattoos, the results may be varied if repeated among an older sample. However, the study is one of only a few that combines tattooing and body piercing into one broader definition of body modification. Generally, this has not been done in the extant literature. Instead, studies tend largely to review tattoos only and then superimpose the results onto what is seen as the less invasive act of body piercing.

Armstrong (1991) surveyed 137 career-oriented women about their tattoo experiences in order to more fully understand purchase, possession, and health risks as well as motivations for obtaining tattoos. The study found that the individual receiving the tattoo and her close friends often supported the decision to receive a modification. However, the choice of receiving a modification was often not supported by parents, siblings, children, and health care professionals. Written from a medical perspective, this research focused on the implications a gendered perspective on tattooing could have on not only the understanding of these practices by medical personnel with no modifications, but also as a way to educate tattoo artists about health risks in the modification experience. It is interesting to note that preliminary research I conducted in the summer

of 2006 revealed a high level of medical knowledge among modifiers who often have training in first aid, CPR, anatomy, and the risk and spread of infection and blood born pathogens. Armstrong's study brings to the forefront the discussion of ownership of women's bodies. By examining the impression that the acquisition of tattoos made on women's associates rather than the women themselves, there is an implied community ownership of the woman's body and the acceptability of what is done to it.

Similar to the Armstrong (1991) study, examining the perceptions of others regarding the modified female body, studies have also been conducted focusing on the challenge that tattooing poses to feminine beauty standards. Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn (2004) reviewed undergraduates' attitudes towards women with tattoos. In their study, narratives describing a female college student, as well as her grades and activities were created. She was also described as having a tattoo. The researchers then varied the size and visibility of the tattoo as well as the woman's grades, weight, and extracurricular activities. Two hundred sixty eight student participants were then asked to rate their responses towards the woman in the narrative based on an attitude scale measuring such things as: pleasant – unpleasant, powerful – weak, passive – active, and cautious – rash, and on a neo-sexism scale which measured the participants' attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement. The study found that, generally, women with tattoos were judged more negatively in regards to perceived gender enactment than women without tattoos, and that participants with more conservative attitudes towards gender roles viewed tattooed women more negatively than those participants with liberal attitudes. As more and more women become tattooed, this study suggests that others' perceptions of

tattooing as a dress act may be important, and particularly in settings where dress practices are strictly enforced, such as in the workplace. Therefore, it was suggested that social perceptions of modified individuals versus those who have modifications may not be limited to the modification sub-culture.

The cultural impact of women's tattoos has been explored to some extent by Sanders (1991), who presents a historical account of the growth of women's interest in tattooing in contemporary society. This study sheds light on the meanings often ascribed to tattoos obtained by women. Uniquely, Sanders focuses on tattoo placement as an indicator of meaning rather than the meaning of the actual design itself. The location, the study suggests, is indicative of women's views on a tattoo as a piece of jewelry, to be shown on some occasions and covered on others. Some interviewees in the study expressed concern over the visibility of their tattoos when dressed for formal occasions, wherein they deemed the modification to be less appropriate than more casual activities.

As increasing numbers of women are receiving modifications, Atkinson (2002) reviewed the use of tattooing, traditionally a masculine practice in Euro-America, by women. Through the use of participant-observation and interview data the cultural tension between conformity and resistance as experienced by Canadian women receiving tattoos is explored. In particular, Atkinson focuses on the ways in which tattooing can be used “as a communicative signifier of 'established' and 'outsider' constructions of femininity” (2002, p. 219).

Braunberger (2000) relied on a combination of historical, secondary data and participant-observation to explore the idea of “feminine” beauty as it is challenged by the

growth of women tattooees. Specifically, Braunberger used the growth of women tattooees to point to the development of monster beauty as an aesthetically revolutionary act. This is one of a very few articles that examines the use of tattooing by women as an act of liberation from male-dominant ideals of beauty. However, this article reviews the experiences of women receiving tattoos, and therefore does not address the active co-creation of these gendered dress acts by women modifiers.

Women as Modifiers

Few researchers have examined the culture of tattooists and piercers. Limited research (Sanders, 1985; Watson, 1998) has examined the commercial environment of contemporary tattoos, which has included some information on the involvement of the modifier who performs the modification within the commercial tattoo or piercing shop.

Sanders (1988a) examined the interrelationship between tattooists and clients during the tattoo experience. Through the use of interviews, Sanders explored techniques tattooists used to reduce anxiety among clients, and established client typologies. However, Sanders' interviews were limited to male tattooists, thereby ignoring the possible differences experienced by female tattooists.

Mifflin (1997) traces the history of women and tattoos from the mid-18th century to the late 20th century. As more women enter the field of tattooing, her review expands from examining modified women to including female modifiers as well, focusing on a historical account of the development of women in the tattooing community over a period of more than 100 years. Mifflin does this through a collection of interviews providing a

journalistic account of the modification of women throughout contemporary American history.

Overall, however, limited research has been done exploring the important role of modifiers in the body modification process. Only one study has focused in its entirety on the experience of modifiers (Sanders, 1988a). Although this study points to the importance of modifiers in the process of modification, by focusing solely on the experiences of male modifiers any attempt at understanding the female voice is conspicuously absent. Mifflin's (1997) historical account of the development of female body modification is very detailed, and includes a review of female modifier experiences. However, this is not the primary research goal, but rather a step in the historical tracing of women's involvement in body modification. These studies further point to the need for research that examines women as modifiers and their role in the creation of meaning via body modification.

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature that informs the central research question and its broader issues. I discussed the historical development of body modification as it relates to women's use of modification and the development of contemporary Euro-American practices. I examined the ways in which the body, particularly the dressed body, is a part of being-in-the-world. The relationship of the gendered body to the experience of being was also explored, which in turn, illuminates how the gendered experience of dressing the body might inform our ways of knowing. By linking together this framework, I provided a way in which women's body

modification experiences can be explored, both as modified and as modifiers. The next chapter will further establish this framework through the interpretive methodology that is used in this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

What is it like to be a woman working in the body modification industry? The gendered experience of dressing the body within the world is central to understanding the relationship between dress and the body (Calefato, 2004; Entwistle, 2000b), and is the fundamental premise of this research. As discussed in the introduction, this study explores the experiences of women as modifiers and as modified. These are two distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, ways of being. In this chapter, I further examine the issues important to the experiences of women modifiers to the process of inquiry that will be used to investigate the research topic.

This research begins to fill a gap in the knowledge that exists regarding the gendered use of body modification, specifically as a dress practice, in the construction of identity. Thus, in this chapter I develop a methodological framework to be used in exploring body modification and to further establish a relationship between women and the creation of identity through the experience of modifying the body. This framework is constructed using a phenomenological perspective, which is outlined within the three parts of this chapter: procedure, process, and theoretical considerations.

I begin with a general discussion of phenomenological intentions in regards to the use of interpretive research, including the ways that methodology and epistemology are linked through the study of lived experience. I then explain the procedure I used

to conduct the study, beginning with an explanation of the selection of participants. This is followed by a discussion of the three primary methods used within the context of the proposed fieldwork: a questionnaire, long interviews, and participant-observation.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the study of lived experience from a phenomenological-interpretive perspective. Within this section, issues important to the creation of texts to be used in the study are discussed and particularly interviews and observation. I then examine some of the issues involved in determining what constitutes women's lived experience throughout the research process. Following this I explain the three levels of interpretation that form the approach to analysis of the texts. This section concludes with a discussion of how the interpretation was forged through a partnership with each of the participants.

In the third part of this chapter, I explore the link between theory and the methodological and epistemological considerations that frame this study. Specifically, I provide an overview of Cixous' theory of *l'écriture féminine*, which I discuss as a useful position for examining body modification and one that is conducive to a methodology based on the exploration of lived experience.

Procedure: Exploring Lived Experience

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) provide a holistic approach to the crafting of qualitative research, wherein the relationship of researcher and participants is one of collaboration, emphasizing the "research nexus", or the relationship between *theory*, *method*, *methodology*, and *epistemology*. In deductive positivist research, theory is often tested or verified, and provides a guiding framework for the research. However, the

inductive approaches typically used in qualitative research seek to develop theory out of the inquiry conducted. *Method* is defined as the tools used by researchers to gather data, or texts. Harding (1987) describes a research method as an “evidence-gathering technique” which may include the use of the following techniques: “listening to ... informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records” (p. 2). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) consider *methodology* to be the “bridge that brings theory and method, perspective and tool, together” (p. 21). This bridge is traveled throughout the research process. *Epistemology* according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy, is a guiding belief system about “how human beings produce knowledge through varied degrees and forms of interaction” (2006, p. 17). Epistemology is, in turn, linked to, or enacted within, a theoretical structure.

A theory of knowledge that encompasses an understanding of the relationship of the body and the lived world is crucial for exploring the experiences of women as modified and as modifiers. Phenomenology is a perspective that aims to explore how individuals experience different things. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) point to observation, in-depth interviewing, and examination of texts as popular methods for conducting phenomenological research. However, phenomenology neglects to include the important variety of experiences as they occur across different (e.g. gendered, ethnic, etc.) bodies. Although phenomenological research is a good starting point for exploring the experiences of body modification, it is therefore important to draw on perspectives that account for variation, specifically those pertaining to gender in bodily experience, when examining women’s experiences in body modification.

Grosz's theory of difference provides the critical inclusion of women within the phenomenological understanding of lived experience. Specifically, this ontological positioning of difference creates an avenue for the rewriting of women's lived experience, in that Grosz suggests a new perspective for feminism that will allow for new understandings of experience,

Feminism is no longer required to look inward at the conditions and effects of subjectivity, desire, pleasure, at the interpersonal networks and oppressive impingements of institutions on socially subordinated groups; it is now also urgent that it direct its gaze outward, not only at the social and historical conditions of patriarchy, but also to the larger material and natural forces at play in the social, historical, and sexual. (2005, p. 183)

Consequently, a phenomenological approach to understanding the material experience of modifying the body can be used as a gendered perspective for understanding women's lived experiences.

This research is interpretive in nature, and seeks to listen to the stories of women working in the contemporary body modification industry as they are constructed by the individuals themselves (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The research focus is fashioned by the question: What is it like to be a woman working in the body modification industry? And, it is particularly concerned with those experiences that have to do with the creation of identity through the process of dressing the body. Therefore, the methodology is founded on a phenomenological exploration of meaning through lived experience, with a focus on how the notion of being a woman shapes a specifically gendered experience of body modification.

Participants

Working from a phenomenological perspective that incorporates the importance of gender in experience, methods conducive to research exploring the nature of lived experience were used in the selection of participants. The four participants of this study were selected from preliminary research I conducted with nine women employed as body modifiers throughout North Carolina during the summer of 2006. In order to gain access to the commercial tattoo and piercing settings in which I conducted my preliminary research, I obtained written permission from the owners of each location. In addition, I garnered written consent from each of the participants. The focus of the preliminary research was on the experiences of these women as modified individuals. In the present research, I selected four of these nine women with the aim to more fully explore their individual experiences not only as modified women, but as women working as modifiers.

There are similarities among these women with respect to three significant factors which I used to select this particular group: gender, body modification, and culture. The fact that all of the participants are women of the same generation leads to similarities in terms of the social roles and expectations of their gender. That is, all of the women had some level of postsecondary education, and half of the women of the study were married. However, none of the women felt particular pressure to negotiate their professional goals with their domestic goals, and felt that, though compromises were made for professional advancement, they experienced no social consequences as a result of these decisions.

Each of the women worked as body modifiers in North Carolina. Most of them developed an interest in body modification from a young age, and started modifying their

bodies in their early teens. Today, the four modifiers work as tattoo artists and body piercers and utilize a wide variety of techniques and styles to create diversity in their work. Although there are hundreds of women working as modifiers throughout the United States, I chose to focus on four in order to provide as in-depth an exploration of the lived experience as possible. The four women are diverse in their professional experiences in body modification, as half worked as tattoo artists and half as body piercers. Each has her own style, technique, and approach to the process of creation and interaction with clients.

The diversity in their use of body modification is similar to the diversity in lived experiences among them. Each woman came from a different background and point of view, even though they are all modifiers currently working in North Carolina. Like their modifications and work as modifiers, their lives reflect the multiplicity of experiences of women modifiers living and working in contemporary America. I suggest that this diversity is crucial to the purpose of the research because it aids in illustrating the myriad of interpretive possibilities of women's lived experience and body modification. In addition, the diversity of self-expression, process of creation, and professional involvement found among the four modifiers provides a broad understanding of the nature of women's involvement in body modification today.

My role as a researcher is also important in framing the research conducted, particularly since I have already done research with the participants. Although it is the goal of phenomenological research to explore the lived experience of the participants

through their own voices, it must be acknowledged that their voices are framed by the context of the study such that its objectives and purpose are addressed.

Methods

As stated earlier, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) suggest that methods used in phenomenological research typically take the form of observation, interviews, and the examination of texts. Van Manen (1990) suggests that similar forms, such as interviews, observations, and personal writings, are all data, or texts, that can be utilized in the exploration of lived experience. Given these suggestions, I use three tools to collect such texts for this study: (a) a questionnaire used to compile demographic information on the participant, (b) in-depth interviews conducted individually with each of the four participants, and (c) observation of each of the participants within the commercial setting where they work as modifiers.

I spent a minimum of five days with each modifier, and compiled two to four hours of interviews with each participant. Since I had already met each of them during the previous fieldwork, the first day spent with each participant consisted of a general period of getting re-acquainted. During this time, I asked the participant to complete the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) and began the observation process. At the end of the first day, I reviewed the demographic questionnaire in order to prepare for the interview process which began on the second day. The demographic questionnaire provided me with in-depth background information about each modifier. This background information includes general information about each participant, including

family history and living situation, formal and informal education, personal modifications, and involvement in the modification industry.

The interview and observation processes then took place throughout the remaining four days, with a semi-structured interview session occurring each day and lasting approximately one hour, depending on the availability of the modifier during her work day, the amount of conversation that occurred, and the information that was covered. The interview was constructed in such a way as to provide clear areas of discussion for each day's conversation, though overlap of topical areas did occur. Interview questions are structured thematically to address the research objectives and include: (a) personal history, including personal modification choices, (b) experiences with clients, and (c) connections between modification and identity development, (d) her role within the profession, and (e) reflection about the research process (see Appendix B for a complete list of questions). By structuring the interviews this way, I came to a more in-depth understanding of the meaning each woman attaches to her lived experiences and how these experiences are expressed and understood by her involvement in body modification.

The interview questions were based, in part, on my previous experience of interviews with the women during my preliminary research. During this time I became aware of the importance of structuring questions in such a way as to make them possible to answer without too much difficulty or frustration on the part of the participants. I learned that it was important to ask questions that were not too broad, or the modifiers would have difficulty structuring an answer that they felt was coherent and representative of their experiences. Instead, during this research, I would ask four or five more specific

questions, which gave the women an avenue for addressing broader concepts. For instance, in the preliminary research I asked the participants the two part question, What led you to do body modification on yourself? On others? and the women often found them too broad to answer thoroughly. During the present research this question was then broken into two sub-sections exploring her personal history, her personal modifications, and her experiences modifying others, with each sub-section containing three to five more questions. This approach allowed the participants to explore their involvement in body modification from multiple angles, which, in turn, allowed for more in-depth answers.

It is also important to note that the structure of each interview was different depending on the nature of the participant's needs and the level of importance placed on different experiential factors addressed throughout the interview process. Therefore, it was important that I was flexible to the needs of the participants throughout the research process. This flexibility extended from the more technical aspect of the interview process, such as the willingness to be audio-taped, to the comfort level and conversational nature that varied among the participants. I was already somewhat aware of each participant's response to the research process, given the preliminary research that I had conducted. Through this previous interaction, I also become aware of which of the nine might be willing to involve themselves in a more time-intensive research process.

Despite doing previous research with the modifiers, there were still obstacles to my entering the field. Although I have previously worked with each of the four women and had their cooperation during the process, I was nevertheless considered an outsider to

the body modification industry. This was not only apparent through my status as researcher, but also through my personal selection and knowledge of modifications. Although at the time of the research I was tattooed and pierced, I was not heavily modified, and therefore was not considered to be truly a part of the larger understanding of body modification by many of the participants. This was further evidenced when, at the end of the research period, I received a fairly large tattoo on my upper arm and Lacie, the tattoo artist completing the work, explained how excited she was to be giving me my first “real” tattoo: one that showed an increased commitment to body modification through my willingness to have a more visible modification. In addition to my own modified state, I had no experience with modifying others, thus I went into the field without an understanding of the modification process from the perspective of those working within the industry.

In order to address the significance of these issues for the research process, I posed questions about the research process itself, including: how do you feel about participating in this research? What about this process made it most valuable to you? What, if anything, was revealed to you about yourself or your work during this process? Through these questions, I sought an understanding of their experiences with the research process. Further, through this process the modifiers often responded with additional experiences or expanded upon ones already discussed. As my own reflections on the research process prompted further directions and issues to explore with each modifier, such questions may have served to prompt a similar ongoing engagement on the part of

the participants. The reactions to the research process, both my own and that of the participants are discussed more fully in Chapter Seven, “Conclusions and Implications.”

I implemented close participant-observation throughout the total time I spent with each modifier. Through these observations, I was able to witness various kinds of activities, including the modification process, interaction with co-workers, the use of “down time”, and interaction with me. I kept field notes recording my own observations which I often visited and revisited throughout the research process and further explored through a journaling process. By doing both field notes and journaling I was able to further record my response to and understanding of the research process and to reflect on the issues that surfaced.

According to Calefato (2004), dress can be a means through which to explore lived experience. She writes,

The clothed body expresses the way in which a subject is in and of the world through his/her aesthetic and physical appearance, his/her relation with other bodies and lived bodily experiences. (p. 2)

Through our discussions of their personal modifications and of their involvement with the modification process of others, the women were able to fully explore the process of creation as it occurs. This, in turn, allowed me to better understand the individual choices surrounding the modification experience as they are made by the customer and negotiated with the modifier, thereby creating a truly unique form of dress. This process of creation actively took place throughout the entire research process. Through the review of the demographic questionnaire, I was able to review examples of the women’s personal dress

practices through their own modifications. Then, in the interviews specific questions regarding the women's feelings about their own modifications and their involvement in the creation of modifications on clients were further addressed. Discussions included: the meanings associated with her personal modifications and the attainment of them, the relationship between her personal modifications and her work as a modifier, the process of creation and the involvement in modifications for customers, the evolution of her work and her future goals in the profession, and her views on the U.S. body modification industry. Each topic provided insight into the meaning of body modification for each participant, in the context of her lived experience.

By implementing each of these methods within a framework of phenomenology, I explore the multi-faceted nature of women's experiences as body modifiers. Specifically, the demographic questionnaire provided basic information about the individual's background. The interviews then focused on questions of why she became involved in body modification and her perceived role as a modifier. Lastly, the use of field notes collected through observation and documentation of the modifications created by, for, and with customers specifically addressed the co-creation of meaning via body modification as a means of dressing the body. Combined, all of these methods work together to allow for a holistic understanding of what it is like to be a woman working in the body modification industry.

Returning to Harding (1987) and Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2006) concepts of method and methodology, each of the three methods used in this study were chosen based on the methodological framework used. The goal of the research was to reveal the

different notions of lived experience for each of the four women modifiers, and the specific methods were chosen to aid in this process. Each of the three methods was designed to explore different facets of the modifier's lived experience. To put it another way, the demographic questionnaire was designed to focus on "what" issues, such as what modifications the women had or what their personal background is. Interview questions were designed to address "how" and "why" questions, including those inquiries into how each woman sees her role in the body modification industry as a modified woman and as a modifier. Observations and the resulting field notes were also important, in that they served to further aid in the interpretation of the interview and questionnaire information. When combined, the three methods reflected the methodological goal of exploring lived experience and served to further reveal how each woman experiences her involvement in body modification.

Process: Linking Methodology with Epistemology

Phenomenological theory was originally conceived of by Edmund Husserl as a response to the methods of scientific inquiry in the early 1900s. Husserl believed that, rather than a Cartesian separation of the mind and body, the body was essential to gaining an understanding of the world. Subjective experience was the key to understanding. Rather than seeking an objective Truth, as was popular among research of the period, Husserl instead sought to find truths as they were experienced by individuals. He believed that as more individual truths were explored, commonalities would be found, and greater understanding of a particular phenomenon could be gained. Truth was not a universal, stagnant understanding, but changed as an individual's experiences and

perceptions of the world changed. In order to understand these truths, however, Husserl believed that the researcher needed to separate from involvement in the phenomenon being studied and objectively review others' subjective experiences, as without this separation the researcher's individual judgment would cloud the results. As phenomenology developed as a field, new ideas and practices would be added to the core understanding of knowledge through individual experience.

Merleau-Ponty further developed Husserl's concepts of phenomenology in his supposition that it was impossible to separate the researcher from the phenomenon being studied due to the interactive nature of human understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, the locus of all human understanding was through physical awareness of the body. This was an expanded notion of subjectivity, or how individuals understand the world through their personal experiences. He stressed the importance that all of these experiences are had through the body and that they are not only subjective, but inter-subjective as well. Merleau-Ponty proposed that our very bodily nature, as sensing beings, allows us to experience and understand the world, and makes us a part of the world we experience. Additionally, as we are a part of the world, others can experience us as a part of their world. This creates an inter-subjective, interactive understanding of the world through the human sensual experience. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is particularly well suited for studying the body as a textual subject. Because all understanding is gained through bodily experience, changes made to the body will change both the subjective and inter-subjective nature of understanding. The nature of the dressed body is particularly important, as dress is often understood in terms of a multi-sensual experience. Dress

practices can affect the sight, sound, smell, taste, or feel of the body. Body modification, like other dress practices will, through changing the body, change the experiential nature of being in multiple ways.

The nature of lived experience captured through research is contingent upon the methodological tools used during the process of inquiry. As mentioned earlier, in this research I use multiple tools in order to gain a richer, more integrated understanding of women's experiences as contemporary body modifiers. As discussed below, each method chosen provides insight into and a particular perspective of the lived experience of the participants. Interviews yielded information about the experiences the participants had in developing themselves as body modifiers and observation served to explore their social interaction in the cultural environment of their place of employment. Combined, these methods allow for a big-picture interpretation that reflects the complex, multi-dimensional nature of their lived experience.

In choosing to conduct in-depth interviews, it is important that the researcher have sufficient background information on the participants so that a rich dialogue can be developed. McCracken (1988) suggests that all research using long interviews should also contain a questionnaire. The creation of a demographic questionnaire allows for the researcher to have some familiarity with the participants developed before the interview is undertaken. I utilized a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to obtain background information on the participants including their family relations and level of involvement in the body modification industry. This information allowed me to more fully understand the experiences of these women within the body modification industry.

When choosing between structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews it is important to consider which method will best serve the type of inquiry at hand. The degree of structure will impact the role played by the researcher in the interview situation, as with more structure, more control is imposed (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In addition, because the researcher has more control over the responses given, more structured interviews tend to result in more standardization among responses. However, standardization can partially limit the extent to which the participants' experiences are captured by the interview, thereby preventing a free-flowing conversational process. I conducted a series of four to five, one to two hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the participants (see Appendix B – Interview Schedule). I used specific questions to build the conversation; however, the participants were also given freedom to talk about what was important to them during the interviews. This way, structure is provided to achieve a level of consistency, yet individual perspective can still be the primary focus.

Ethnographic research, often achieved through methods of observation, aims to make sense of culturally-specific lived experience. As the primary tool of ethnographic research, observation can be conducted in a variety of different ways, ranging from pure observation to pure participation (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). These distinctions indicate the level of involvement the researcher has with the natural environment and the cultural group they are studying. I collected observation data, recorded in the form of field notes, from the position of an observer-as-participant. In order to successfully research body modification practices using a phenomenological perspective it is also important that the

researcher remains involved with the topic at a participatory level. If understanding is reached through subjective and inter-subjective involvement, the greatest level of understanding is gained through direct participation with the experiences being studied. In addition, due to the level of meaning often ascribed to the body modification experience it is important to have a developed relationship with the individuals involved in the process of the co-creation of the modification. Phenomenological explorations encourage heavy researcher involvement within the research environment in order to more fully understand bodily experience. However, due to the highly skilled and technical nature of the participants' experiences as body modifiers, it was difficult for me, as a researcher, to be able to do more than observe. Yet, through my entrance into the environment and the interaction I had with both the modifiers and the customers becoming modified, my presence could not be ignored, and therefore I had an impact on what I observed.

Levels of Interpretation

Experiences explored through the use of interpretive methods are shaped by the researcher's impact on the environment in which the texts are gathered. The naturalistic goal of interpretive research is to gain an experiential view of the daily lived experiences of the individual being studied. However, the very act of naturalistic research influences the data being gathered, as the researcher unavoidably becomes a part of the participant's experiences as they are being studied. With this in mind, to interpret the experiences of the participants to the fullest extent possible I utilized three levels of interpretation in the analysis of texts: (a) personal narratives, (b) thematic analysis, and (c) theoretical

considerations. In the first level, personal narratives are used to focus on each of the modifier's experiences as individuals. Questionnaire responses were combined with interview responses to create a cohesive narrative or text of each participant. In the second level of interpretation, I examined the similarities and differences across the narratives of the four participants in order to explore thematic connections between these texts. In the third level of interpretation, I examined the larger theoretical questions raised in the development of the thematic interpretation. As I discuss below, this theoretical exploration allows for the examination of how women use the body to effectively write or construct their own meaning of lived experience.

In the first level of interpretation, I attempted to construct personal narratives that highlighted the individual women's experiences and involvement in the body modification industry. These narratives were constructed by combining each woman's response to the questionnaire and the interviews, and are unique to each modifier, using her own words to convey experience whenever possible. My voice as researcher enters the narratives as I began to organize them based on topics and issues that I chose to address within the research process. Although I structure each narrative around similar factors such as personal history and modifications, creative process, the process of modifying customers, and involvement in the professional field, the relevance of each factor is different for each woman, as the individual experiences are unique to her. Through this approach, the results of the research process could be linked to the interpretive intentions of the research, in that the narrative provides a representation of

the woman's lived experience as expressed through her own words to the furthest extent possible.

In the second level of interpretation, I examined the commonalities in experience among the four modifiers. Through the thematic interpretation of their experiences, I am able to explore the concept of collective experience as it surfaces within and across the personal narratives of the women. These collective experiences are then organized into three conceptual areas that shape the interpretation: *Self-expression*, *Creation*, and *Profession*. These conceptual areas are used to structure the themes that develop out of the personal narratives, and are thus used as tools to provide an understanding of the women as a group.

The purpose of the second level of interpretation is to explore body modification as lived experience, one of the primary objectives of the study. The ways that each modifier's experiences can be understood as part of a larger whole are discussed in order to connect them to broader issues and to further contextualize meaning within the personal narratives. Through this second level of interpretation, implications of the experiences of women within body modification for understanding body modification as a creative and consumptive act are discussed. My own voice as interpreter further enters into the understanding of the four women's experiences at this level of interpretation, however, because the themes surface from the personal narratives, each modifier's voice remains strong.

In order to examine the broader issues that surface from the personal narratives and thematic interpretation, a third level of interpretation was created. Theoretical

questions important to the study, such as: in what way are women's experiences with body modification socially, culturally, and historically constructed, and, does body modification provide a unique space for gendered expression of women's lived experience? provide the basis for the third level of interpretation. It is in this level of interpretation that I begin to theorize about broader implications of the four women's experiences as modifiers. By relating involvement in the body modification industry to lived experience, I discuss issues important to the purpose of the study: to explore what it is like to work as a woman in the body modification industry.

Participant Confirmation

Each level of interpretation builds on the one previous, and ultimately incorporates my voice, as researcher, further into the text. Therefore, it was important to obtain participant confirmation during various stages of the analysis. In order to ensure that the voices of the participants were heard throughout the interpretation, I engaged in ongoing communication with the women during each level of interpretation. I began by sending each modifier a copy of her personal narrative (through mail, e-mail, or hand delivery), and asked that she review and suggest changes to the content of the narrative. Upon the completion of each narrative, I sent each participant a copy of the second and third levels of interpretation, in turn, and again asked her to provide feedback on the relevance of each of the issues raised in them.

Because lived experience is the starting point of this research, and understanding experience is the purpose of the study, the participation of the modifiers in the interpretation process was crucial. Because of the largely subjective nature of truth and its

relation to the time and place in which experiences occur, meanings associated with those experiences are often fluid in nature. Therefore, the interpretation process is viewed as not necessarily a means to determine truth, but is instead a way to gain greater understanding of lived experience. I attempted to balance my own understanding of experience with those of the modifiers, validated through on-going dialogue between myself and the participants and ultimately resulting in a response to the question: What is it like to be a woman working in the body modification industry?

Theoretical Considerations: L'écriture Feminine

In exploring the nature of women's experiences as body modifiers, it is important to employ not only an understanding of bodily lived experience, but an epistemological framework that allows for an exploration of *women's* bodily experiences. To achieve this in the interpretation, I dealt with broader questions of experience, such as: how do women body modifiers link their experiences to the creation of their identity, and, is this link framed by the process of body modification?

Feminist epistemologies developed out of deconstructionist and postmodern theoretical movements (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Postmodernism is particularly concerned with the "play of signs, the shifting sand of interpretation" (Olesen, 1994, p. 164). Therefore, this stance is narrative-based, focusing on the distinction between text and reality. As the nature of truth, including constructions of gender, is nothing but a play of text, postmodern feminists posit that there is no privileged gendered experience and are often concerned with how meaning is constructed through text in order to challenge the nature of gendered meanings (Olesen, 1994). Such scholars are particularly interested

in three general areas of inquiry: (a) the process of consumption of cultural objects and their meaning, (b) the textual analysis of cultural objects and, (c) the study of lived cultural experiences as they are shaped by cultural meanings (Olesen, 1994).

Based heavily on the deconstructionist works of Derrida as well as the works of Freud and Lacan, Hélène Cixous developed a postmodern theory that explores the textual nature of gendered representation. Cixous (1976) examines the binary oppositions which privilege the male over the female in both the experience and representation of those experiences. Cixous argues that because a child must separate from the mother (female) in order to enter the world, women are rendered separate from the world and unrepresentable in current texts available for the expression of experience. If this is the case, all understanding, even texts created by women, are not “female”. This is because they are written in a male voice, currently the only option that exists for textual construction.

In order to provide an avenue for experiencing female difference, Cixous (1976) suggests the development of *l'écriture féminine*, or female writing. Rather than the elimination of sexual difference, Cixous argues for an equally privileged reading of both male and female experience. Rather than creating a concept of sexual difference accessible to all, the goal of negating sexual difference simply results in the removal of female experience and the privileging of male writing. In her construction of male and female writing, Cixous designates male writing as narrative and female writing as poetry. Male writing follows a logical framework that adheres to strict rules and guidelines for construction. Female writing, in contrast, is considered more emotional and free-flowing,

less regulated by pre-established systems of construction, and therefore, must come from a female (imaginary, “slippery”, transient) position.

Cixous’ (1976) theory of *l’écriture féminine* provides an avenue through which Grosz’s concept of sexual difference can be further explored. Female writing, like sexual difference, incorporates the socio-cultural construction of gender onto biologically constructed bodies that create lived experience through the body. It is on these bodies of sexual difference that bodily inscriptions can be created. Grosz’s (1990) concept of the primitive and modern body, based on the works of Lingis (1984), mirrors Cixous’ concept of male and female writing. The modern (male) body is read in terms of what is covered, hidden, and presumed. In contrast, the primitive (female) body is a surface onto which sign-laden marks can be inscribed with specific intention. According to Grosz (1990),

The ‘modern body’ is a body read symptomatically, in terms of what it hides. The primitive body, by contrast is all surface: it is a proliferation or profusion of zones, indefinitely extending libidinal intensity unevenly over the body’s surface ... to mark the body (like the Medusa’s Head) through a multiplication of phalluses that are peculiarly non-phallic because of their profusion. (p. 241)

Cixous (1976) centers female writing on the metaphorical concept of Medusa, suggesting that female writing must challenge the patriarchally constructed understanding of lived experience in the same way that Medusa, with her head of serpents (phalluses) challenges the sexually dominant position of men.

L’écriture féminine is similar to the Freudian concept of hysterics. In cases of hysteria the body “speaks” what the mind cannot. In the case of *l’écriture féminine* the

unconscious body is used as a mode of writing. According to Cixous (1976), *l'écriture féminine* occurs outside of the realm of thematic understanding, and instead in the realm of metaphor. This makes phenomenology, which resists any preconceived thematic constraints, an ideal methodological framework for the exploration of women's construction of identity through dress.

In an additional parallel to the phenomenological standpoint, Cixous states, "I'll give you your body, and you'll give me mine" (1976, p. 885), suggesting that in order to truly create a female text, the text must be co-constructed by women through bodily experiences. Similarly, Hardin (1999) suggests that women must find new ways and use a "new stylus and a new medium" (p. 95) to write themselves outside of patriarchal understanding (Cixous, 1976). According to Hardin, tattooing provides this opportunity because of its varied symbolic referential and aesthetic meanings. Since the text can be interpreted in any number of ways and relationships, "the text is thus disruptive because it cannot be controlled" (Hardin, 1999, p. 96). By having their bodies tattooed, women may create their own embodied meaning. The co-construction of meaning as shared by the modifier and the modified becomes an area for women to construct meaning with one another. This relationship highlights not only the modification received by the modified, but the gendered experiences of the modifier, allowing for or creating a potential site for *l'écriture féminine*.

The comments by Hardin (1999) suggest that women may use body modification as a way to rewrite their sense of identity as it is understood through bodily experience. In the third level of interpretation, I examined the participants' gendered experiences in

body modification, and how these experiences relate to their sense of identity. When exploring the theoretical implications of women's experiences within the body modification industry, I explored modification as a possible site for the occurrence of *l'écriture féminine*. In particular, I paid attention to the processes of the creation of body modifications as they occur between the modifier and the individual being modified as a possible site for the negotiation and construction of gendered identity represented and therefore expressed in the act of writing through the body.

Summary

In this chapter, I have mapped out a methodological framework for addressing the research question: What is it like to be a woman working in the body modification industry? I have explained how this framework is structured by the relationship between method, methodology, and epistemological and theoretical considerations. I have discussed how this relationship is facilitated by the use of a phenomenological-interpretive methodology due to the central focus on the experiences of the participants. I have provided discussion of the participants as well as the procedure for the gathering of data. I described the methodological tools used to gather data, and related these tools to the larger understanding of experience as suggested by the implications of the research question. Finally, the three levels of interpretation were discussed in relation to the relevance each has given the epistemological and theoretical considerations employed in the study.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

In this chapter, I present the first level of interpretation through personal narratives of each participant. The narratives are diverse, reflecting the different personal and professional development of each woman. Each narrative combines information gathered through the use of the three methods outlined in the previous chapter. Each modifier is presented separately, though all narratives are structured similarly. Ideas that surface in the texts are used to coherently and concisely structure the narrative presentation, and therefore provide a loose framework used for each narrative. Although there are similarities in narrative structure, each modifier's narrative is presented as separate from the other three.

Each narrative begins with the personal background and family situation of the modifier. In the personal background, a particular emphasis is placed on the participant's development as a modified individual. Each narrative includes a discussion of early experiences and training in the body modification industry, as well as any continued training and continued industry opportunities she has been involved in. In addition, an explanation of the modifier's creative process, which includes discussion of how she sees her work in relation to the larger field of art, personal techniques and style, and her approach to creating pieces are presented. The importance of the creative process is examined in terms of the interactive process of creation that occurs between the modifier

and the client. Issues of space are explored, including the modifier's workspace, as well as her view on the negotiation of family expectations, professional expectations, and dress choices. Also presented are her perceptions about the relation between identity and work, as well as her future goals as a modifier and a member of the modification community.

Wendi

Wendi, 32, was born in Winston-Salem and grew up in Lexington, North Carolina, where she lived until 1995. Wendi is the second of two children. Wendi's parents were divorced when she was young; she has a half-brother and half-sister through her father's remarriage. Wendi's father, originally from Siler City, North Carolina works as an electrician, and her mother, originally from Lexington, was a stay-at-home mom until after her parent's divorce when she began working for a plumbing company. After her parent's divorce, Wendi grew up primarily with her mother, though she does remain in contact with her father. Wendi's mother passed away in February of 2006. After graduating from North Davidson High School, Wendi attended Davidson County Community College, studying Visual Arts for a year. In 1995, Wendi moved briefly to Wilmington, North Carolina, but returned to Lexington after three months. After working as a cosmetics consultant, Wendi became a professional body piercer and shop manager at Kingpin Tattoo in Greensboro, North Carolina where she has been for eight and a half years. It was at Kingpin that Wendi started dating her husband, Jon, who works there as a tattoo artist. Jon and Wendi have no children, and have no plans to have any in the

immediate future, due in part to their busy work schedules. However, they do have two cats and two dogs that are considered the babies of the family.

In her youth, Wendi recalled being somewhat tomboyish and not necessarily that interested in decorating her body, particularly not through piercings. Because Wendi's mother did not take her to get her ears pierced when she was younger, it was not until she was about 13 years old that she had her first piercing. Although her mother was "super-excited" that she had showed an interest in getting her ears pierced, the experience was not as pleasant for Wendi:

W: I went to the local jewelry store to have them done and did the first one, and about an hour and a half later ... the second one. It was the actual ear piercing gun itself that was so excruciatingly painful. ...now I know that they rip through your ear instead of puncturing them ... so it's like basically stapling your ears, or how they tag cows. Now I see why the cows don't like that.

In the next two years Wendi acquired a number of piercings, including those which she would consider her first modifications. By the time she was 16, Wendi had four piercings on each earlobe, four ear cartilage piercings, and a navel piercing. When she was 18, Wendi had her nostril pierced as well.

W: ...what I would classify as my first ... modification, would be my navel. My mom [took me], cuz she caught me trying to do it myself. Ended up having problems with it, I was super heavy then, and they shouldn't have done it ... I ended up taking it out. Then I had my nostril done when I lived in Wilmington ... let my friend do it. Didn't keep that one very long ... for that reason. Plus, I always have sinus problems, so it was a difficult one to keep.

These first few experiences with piercing had an effect on her choice to become a body piercer, as well as on the responses of some family members when she announced

her intentions. Wendi recalls how her mother's reaction to her decision to apprentice was based on Wendi's initial response to piercing:

W: ...that's one reason she got so freaked out with me getting into body piercing, was because of that traumatic event. She was like, 'You wouldn't even get your ears pierced, what are you talking about?'

All of these early experiences, however, contributed to Wendi's perspective on her occupation today:

W: ...I don't want to be one of those people who's a crackpot body piercer ... I wanted to be trained by the best to be the best that I could be. Actually, all the bad experiences I had in the past have helped me become a better body piercer because I have more ethics. I don't want anyone to go through all the crazy stuff that I went through ... the wishy washiness. Consistency is good, and being up front with people...they're going to appreciate you more for it.

By her twenties, Wendi had added a number of piercings, including: two bridges, navel (a second and third time), vertical and horizontal nipples, hood, two vulvas, cheeks, lobes stretched to $\frac{3}{4}$ " (see Table 2, p. 188), two helix (see Figure 17, p. 187), two tragus, two conch, and a beauty mark (see page 188 for an explanation of terms). Over time, however, Wendi has lost a number of these piercings, generally because she has had some sort of problem with them. She removed her cartilage piercings to meet workplace requirements at Belk's. Her beauty mark was ripped, and never healed properly. Wendi recalled her favorite piercing, which had to be removed:

W: My favorite piercing I ever had, and could not keep, was my septum. I love it. But, I have a deviated septum. I had my nose broken when I was a kid, and in order to fix it ... they would have to go back in and break my nose and reset it ...

and it's just not worth it. But, I love the septum piercing, I think on girls ... the really little, petite, it's attractive. That one really broke my heart.

In addition to her piercings, Wendi has approximately 60% of her body tattooed, including her ears, neck, chest, legs, arms, one foot, stomach, back, and hips. The majority of her tattoos are simply aesthetic statements, however some are symbolic or are religious in nature. Wendi was raised Baptist, and though she is not a member of any organized religion, prays daily. Her most meaningful tattoos include a religious piece, a sacred heart, located on her chest as well as a portrait of her mother on her thigh, and a few small tattoos that she has in common with friends which are on a number of locations including her arms and legs.

In the future, Wendi plans to finish tattoos that she has already received. Several unfinished tattoos, including a portrait of her mother, a geisha on her calf, a sleeve on her right arm, a "robot girl" on her leg, and a dagger on her stomach, all currently in various stages of completion, will be finished. However, Wendi sees her body as a blank canvas and that additional possibilities always exist. This includes eventually starting work on a full back piece.

Although Wendi did not plan on becoming a piercer, her interest in art has been important along the way. As a self-proclaimed "super artsy chick" in high school, Wendi has long had an interest in art and has been working as a freelance artist for a number of years. While Wendi was in college she worked as a cosmetics consultant at a Clinique counter in a Belk's department store. After working at Clinique she chose to leave college and work full-time while still doing freelance artwork on the side. During this

period, Wendi also befriended the owners of Kingpin, who encouraged her to become an apprentice. She believes that genetics combined with her educational background helped her on her path to becoming a piercer:

W: The owners thought I would be good at piercing because I was ambidextrous and had small hands, which are good for piercing. Also, I had taken anatomy and advanced anatomy, so I had a background in that.

Originally, Wendi was apprehensive about leaving her chosen career path as a cosmetics consultant. She soon found that piercing offered a number of outlets for her occupational and personal interests, and after a few months of training she knew that she had found her calling:

W: I knew that this was what I wanted to do; this is what I'm supposed to do. Because it's an artistic side and ... because I enjoyed Clinique so much because of the dermatology aspect ... I've always enjoyed anatomy ... but, [piercing is] more personable, more one on one.

Wendi apprenticed for approximately 22 months, learning a wide variety of things to prepare her to become a body piercer:

W: The training is as in-depth as if you were getting dental or medical training. On the first day I was handed a copy of *Grey's Anatomy* and told to memorize it. I've had training in anatomy, physiology, CPR, first aid, and blood borne pathogens ... I spent three months just setting up trays ... learning about sterilization, how to prep. Then I learned how to measure and mark, but they still did the actual piercing.

Wendi's apprenticeship was unpaid, so throughout the experience she continued to work full-time with Clinique and spent her free time and vacation hours at the shop. As her

apprenticeship neared completion, Wendi began piercing under supervision. She remembered her first experience of piercing a customer as being both nerve-wracking and positive:

W: I did an ear cartilage on one of the guys who worked here [his] sister. Because when you're apprenticing you have to go out and find people yourself. She was so nervous ... she'd kept hearing the horror stories about people getting them done with ear piercing guns and how they never heal ... when I'd come near her with the needle, she'd jerk away. Once she calmed down ... it was fine. But, I always remember her because it was my first piercing and because she was ten times more nervous than I was.

As Wendi has become more experienced as a piercer her skills have evolved as well. Although there are few formalized training opportunities for piercers, Wendi tries to remain up to date with any changes in the field through the APP (Association of Professional Piercers) meetings and website. She also hopes to become certified by the APP, which she can be after piercing for 10 years. Wendi may also attend conferences every few years though she generally attends them for fun and a chance to travel, rather than for any specific further training. Wendi's work has been featured in a number of articles on body modification. She was a featured piercer at a national convention in Illinois and has been highlighted in a modification magazine for tattoos that she has received. Wendi has also been actively involved in the local community, beyond the traditional body modification industry, believing that contributing to general education and knowledge on piercings is an integral part of what she does. She estimates that she has participated in roughly 20 interviews for local college students doing reports on body modifications, and a documentary created by students attending Elon College. She has

been interviewed for *Yes Weekly* and *The Greensboro News and Record*, as well as four separate news stations, and is a repeat guest speaker each semester for a public health course at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Recently, Wendi has also taken on her first apprentice, Ashley. Although she has attempted to apprentice other people before Ashley, Wendi considers her to be the first apprentice who has the potential to complete her apprenticeship and become a successful piercer. Before Ashley, Wendi had two previous apprentices who did not work out. Wendi explained that her choice to have only a handful of apprentices thus far was intentional. She is very particular about who she chooses to train, and regularly turns down hopefuls. During the research period, Wendi received multiple phone and in-person inquiries about apprenticeships, all of which she turned down. The apprenticeship process, she explains, requires not only someone who shows talent for the job, but also timing in relation to what the shop needs:

W: ...we don't need anyone right now and we won't train anyone who won't work for us ... typically when you apprentice for body piercing you'll pay three to four grand, I'm doing it for free. I'm willing and spending my time and effort and passing on my knowledge and I'm like, 'You better use it and you better use it well.'

However, even if the shop is in need of an apprentice in order to fill a vacant position, it is important to find someone who is capable of doing the work asked of them:

W: It sucks because we'll get people who are so jazzed ... they want to do it, but if they can't then they can't, it's not for them. It's like trying to be a decorator if you have bad taste. If you want to be a chef you better know how to cook, if you can't cook, you can't cook. There's a lot of people who think you just poke a hole in somebody and it's not a hard job. You have to have a good brain to do this, a

lot of math and measuring, um, sterility, and know the marks and the measurements for the piercings, plus the jewelry too.

Regarding the unsuccessful previous apprentices, Wendi pointed to personal issues or the inability to do the tasks set forth for them as the main reasons for failure. Specifically, Wendi's first apprentice had difficulty taking direction from a female piercer, and the second apprentice lacked the initiative and drive necessary for the field:

W: ...we had one gentleman ... he'd always been our counter person here, so he knew that. But, when we got to actually apprenticing him, he wouldn't listen to me. When I asked him why he said it was because I was a woman ... so we had a big problem with that. I started to train [the second apprentice] and on the first day I knew it wasn't going to work. After I tell you ten times to come here and follow me and see everything I do in a day, and I have to keep coming here and getting you ... no, not how it works.

Wendi speaks of her current apprentice, Ashley, like a proud parent, and clearly takes pleasure in the success of her protégé, whom she affectionately calls "padawan"- a Jedi apprentice in the *Star Wars* movies. From the first day of Ashley's training she proved to be prepared and interested in the field:

W: ...she's definitely my first apprentice that's going somewhere. That first day of training she had heavy duty canvas for practicing ... a pair of calipers for measuring. She had a notebook, it already had notes ... been taking notes for months when she was just in the shop visiting. It was awesome ... she was so excited and so gung-ho.

I asked Wendi if the process of taking on an apprentice has taught her anything about own career. Wendi responded that the most important thing that she was learning was about Ashley herself. She explained that in addition to teaching Ashley the technical

aspects of piercing, Wendi needs to learn about Ashley as a person in order to know how to mentor her to successfully interact with her future co-workers and customers:

W: It's interesting to get to know her one on one, to see how we're gonna mesh ... plus we want to make sure she'll mesh with the people in Winston-Salem. So, for example that's why a lot of establishments don't want to take on a body piercer who's worked for someone else for so long ... you don't know the little things.

In addition to her work as a body piercer, Wendi is also the shop manager for Kingpin tattoo. She is responsible for maintaining the necessary inventory levels for running the shop, doing the paperwork for the required proper management of the business, and is the primary employee working the front counter and answering the phone. Often, working the counter can be complex and requires a broad knowledge base to help customers pick out their modification as well as discuss location and size, as well as getting price quotes from the artists, maintaining appointment schedules, and completing paperwork. Although she did not originally see herself becoming the shop manager, Wendi prefers working in both capacities:

W: In the Winston-Salem shop there's a counter person who does just that entirely. I was offered if I wanted to hire someone for the counter. I didn't want it. I like being able to talk to my clients the whole time they're here. From when they walk in the door and greeting the customer, to getting the piercing, any questions they may have, and saying goodbye. Then it's always the same person no matter if it is day or night, it gives consistency. It has its down side though, when there are twenty people waiting with questions, wanting piercings, or price quotes it can get pretty hectic.

Kingpin Tattoo, in Greensboro, is one of two body modification studios owned by Kelley and Byron Weeks. The Earth's Edge, located in Winston-Salem, is the second

location. Each location is run separately on a daily basis, but combined on larger scale issues. Between Kingpin and the Earth's Edge there are seven tattoo artists, three piercers, and several front counter employees. Earth's Edge was opened in 1993 as a studio strictly for body piercing. In 1997, Kingpin was opened as a shop selling only tattoos. However, due to popular demand, Earth's Edge started offering tattoos and Kingpin began providing piercing. Wendi has been a body piercer at Kingpin tattoo since 1998 (see Figure 1). Wendi takes care of managing the Greensboro location almost entirely on her own, as the owners visit once a week or so to check in. Ashley will work in the Winston-Salem location when her training is complete. Although they rarely work together, the employees of the two stores often gather for holiday parties, and have even gone on cruise vacations together. When talking about her employers, Wendi speaks of them with great respect and admiration:

W: ...I also appreciate what Byron and Kelley have done for me. I would not be where I am in my life if it weren't for Byron and Kelley ... they are kind of my surrogate parents ... I would not have the home that I have, I would not have the vehicle I have, I would not have the knowledge I have ... my talent ... I would not have ... I would not be with Jon ... My life would be completely different if it weren't for them ... I thank them everyday of my life.

Wendi generally works 50-60 hours a week over a six day work week, and has Sundays off. Wendi's workday will generally start between noon and one in the afternoon and end between 9 and 10 at night. She explained that this career choice is not for everyone for this very reason:

Figure 1: Wendi's Workspace



W: We pretty much do eat, sleep, and live our jobs. Especially when we have young people come in and say they want to do this as a living it's like, they need to realize we have no life. I never get to see my family. I only have one day off a week, so everything gets crammed into one day. ... If you're not ready to give up everything else, don't bother.

Despite these long hours, the employees of Kingpin Tattoo spend time with each other outside of work as well, trying to make time for dinner with each other on Saturday night after the store closes.

I asked Wendi how she keeps her enthusiasm and interest in what she does after nearly a decade of piercing. She explained that those piercers who lose interest are often the ones who get caught up in the monotony of the daily routine and fail to appreciate the opportunities given to them. Wendi recalled her experiences in previous jobs in contrast to her current position:

W: I worked at a job for many years that I had to do everything I was told ... wear what I was told ... act the way I was told ... I actually started to become a person I did not like. I appreciate the fact that, here, I can ... wear whatever I want. I can be me. I can be silly. I can speak my mind. And I can use my brain on a daily basis.

She also explained that focusing on each individual customer from both a personal and business standpoint can help her with what is often perceived by other piercers as the redundancy of the job:

W: ... Just because it may be a navel over and over again ... But, every navel that walks in the door is completely different. They'll have a completely different shape, different body type ... The repetition of doing a bunch of navels, it sucks. But, it's paying your bills, and it's keeping you where you're at. That navel is gonna leave, and she's gonna tell her friend. And yeah, you'll get to do her

friends' navel. ... Or, she'll get brave and do something more interesting. ... it all ... falls on each other...

Wendi also explained that attitude is everything in the industry. Keeping a level head is important to enjoying piercing for the long-term. She explained that a "rock-star attitude" is a common problem:

W: ... They think that because they can go anywhere in the town that they pierce ... they'll run into fifty people who know who they are that they're freaking somebody ... It's just their personality changes and they're like, 'Do I have to come in and sit here all day and do nothing?' ... You are not Mick Jagger.

Wendi appreciates what has been given to her, and the notoriety in the community, but her own happiness is the key criterion:

W: The main thing is I enjoy what I do, my customers like me, I do a good job, I'm well known in the community, and I'm happy. That's the main thing. A lot of people want to work here cuz they think it's cool.

In a typical day Wendi keeps busy engaged in a wide variety of activities, from piercing customers to processing paperwork. During slow periods she indulges what she refers to as her "O.C.D. nature" and cleans the store. Wendi feels that what she does is more than simply piercing customers. Instead, she is intimately involved with the choices and experiences of individuals on a daily basis. When I asked her how she explains what she does, Wendi says that she has a few ways of viewing her job:

W: If you want a super technical answer to that ... I'm a Body Jewelry Installation Technician ... which is my funny answer when people are like, 'What's your official title?' The other way is ... it's like if ... the body is your

temple ... body piercing is your yard art. ... But, basically, I decorate. I'm a typical girl, but I decorate the human body instead of a room.

Her perspective on decorating the body combined with her care for the overall experience of the customer are key aspects to what Wendi views as her personal style of body piercing. Attitude and a personal connection with customers are trademarks of how she approaches her work:

W: ...if you have a crappy attitude about it, or that kind ... of thing and don't make that personal connection with the person you're piercing, and then they have a bad experience, then they just won't do it any more, or they won't come back to you.

This personal style also affects the role that she enacts throughout the customer's body modification experience. For instance, her customers tend to see her as more than a modifier:

W: I have a lot of my customers tell me, 'You're not just my body piercer, you're my friend.' And, you know, I may not hang out with them or see them on the weekend ... but that's really cool. I hold that in high regard. ... What I've been told by a lot of my clients, I have a really good bedside manner, um, very knowledgeable.

Wendi believes her role as a piercer means including personal service, by making sure customers not only get the piercing they want, but also consider what modification will look best for them personally. Wendi explains "you want to make sure they've made a good choice for themselves," particularly when it comes to facial piercings:

W: I'll have a young lady come in ... cute little turned up nose. You don't pierce a turned up nose ... it's not attractive ... people are never gonna see the cuteness

outside, they're gonna see the tail on the inside [of the nose stud] and that's not cute.

Wendi further describes, "If I have someone ask my opinion as far as the visual side of it, I will be honest with them and tell them." However, she draws a line between offering advice and telling customers what to get.

W: I'll have people in and go, 'I want to get a hole poked. I just don't know what.' That's tough, because I never want to say you should do this, and then they hate it.

For customers seeking either piercings or tattoos, Wendi suggests they look over the artists' portfolios available at the counter to narrow down what they are looking for. Then, she can talk with them further to come up with some ideas that may work for them. Wendi sees this as a service provided by Kingpin that is not offered by other shops, where she feels, "...piercers and tattoo artists don't take the time to seriously figure out what that person wants and what they can live with." However, even though she is willing to talk them through a decision, she still encourages them to think on it for a while. If a customer is unsure about whether or not to receive a modification, she suggests they return if they have any questions or when they are more certain, and explains that this is preferred over impulse:

W: That's why most people, their first tattoo gets covered up or removed. Because they just didn't take the time into figuring out what they want. A lot of people will come in and be like, 'Yeah, you got anything with butterflies?' And, we'll pull the butterfly file and they'll look at like two and be like, 'Well, I'll just get this one because I'm tired of looking.' Like, are you serious, you wouldn't do that if you were looking for a plastic surgeon?

When I asked Wendi how she saw herself as part of the process of modifying a customer, she talked about her perspective on the act of modification, as well as that of other modifiers. Specifically, she spoke of spiritual, personal, and customer-related considerations as part of the body modification process. For example, Wendi invoked the perspective of Fakir Musafar, considered the father of the ‘modern primitive’ body modification movement:

W: He takes a lot of it ... from the aspects of Indians, and the Aboriginals, and a lot of the Indonesians, and what it meant to a lot of those sections of people in terms of their heritage ... He wants you to grow with your pain ... and see how that comes across in your personal life.

Although respectful of what Fakir has done in bringing body modification to the mainstream, Wendi sees her role in the process of her own modifications and the modifications of others differently. She contrasts the more traditionally-based perspectives of individuals like Fakir with what she sees as the impact of body modification in a contemporary environment:

W: For some people, in some countries, it’s a tradition ... part of their religion ... that sort of thing. Pretty much here in the U.S., there’s no connection in any way shape or form to that. Most religions are kind of like, ‘Ugh. Don’t do that.’ It’s just a form of decorating the body ... a non-permanent way of decorating the body.¹

¹ Although body piercing is considered a permanent body modification in academic literature, Wendi and many of the other participants consider piercing to be a non-permanent modification. This is because, depending on the size of the pierce and the customer’s skin, many popular pierces will heal with time and with minimal scarring.

As Wendi recalls, her own motivations for getting pierced stemmed from personal goals, “it’s not that I don’t see the spiritual aspect of it, but I’m doing it more as a focus thing ... if I can get through this I can get through anything.” When modifying others, however, Wendi sees each person as being different and needing different things from her throughout the piercing process, and as such, tries to work closely with each customer during the modification:

W: I try to make small talk, just to get to know the person a little bit ... if they’re freaking out you just try to joke with them ... if they’re not talking they’re terrified.

Wendi also asks the customers if they’d like her to explain what is being done, or just to go ahead and pierce them. She sees a definite distinction between the two:

W: ...honestly, 7 out of 10, want me to tell them what I’m doing. ... Though there are people who come in and don’t want to know anything ... those are the people ... that it makes me want to ask, ‘Are you here getting your nostril done because your friend has her’s done?’

Ultimately, Wendi believes that each customer has his or her own reasons for wanting a modification, and, when possible, she likes to understand where customers are coming from in order to give them the best experience that she can. Wendi points to an example of forced modifications to achieve a group membership as perhaps not the best reason for acquiring a modification:

W: ...one of the fraternities ... they had a rule. When you were in your first year ... you had to get a body piercing to finish your pledge. I don’t necessarily agree with that because body modification is a personal choice. ...

However, Wendi points out that oftentimes modifications are *voluntarily* shared by individuals:

W: ...a young guy came in and got a music note on his underarm. ... Mom saw it, loved it ... and now they have matching tattoos. They come in and they have a bonding experience that they are going to have forever.

Wendi has been instrumental in helping customers overcome self-esteem issues, and in some extreme cases even serious medical problems. For example, she helped a customer who was considering a tattoo to deal with her body-image issues:

W: ...we had a young lady come in ... a very large girl ... coming in pricing a tattoo for future reference. And I was like, 'Why future reference?' And she was like, 'I don't want a bunch of strangers looking at my fatness.' ... She came in and got this beautiful ginormous flower bouquet tattoo on her ribcage and it ended up being beautiful. And she actually came in and said, 'You know, I'm totally not ashamed to pull my shirt up. Because I have something beautiful on something that makes me uncomfortable.' ... It does change a person, it does make their self-esteem better and it makes them maybe gives them that motivation ...

Customers have even been sent to Wendi for treatment of psychological disorders. She recalled one memorable experience in which a teenage girl and her mother were sent by a therapist to Wendi in order to acquire piercings. The piercings were meant to counteract the girl's cutting tendencies. Wendi explained why the girl's therapist recommended this treatment:

W: ... with piercing it's gonna be way less abrasive to her body. She's gonna be more open about her pain and whatever stress she's going through. But, it's not gonna be as permanent, she's not going to scar herself the way she had been.

This particular instance required Wendi to be even more attuned to the customer's needs than she already is. When she heard that she was participating in her customer's therapy, Wendi immediately asked for more information on what she was doing, so she would not only learn more but feel comfortable with her own involvement. This, in turn, helped the customer to feel comfortable with the modification process. At first, this customer came fairly regularly, getting her earlobes, cartilage, nostril, and navel pierced. Over time, intervals between piercings grew longer until it was almost a year between visits. When Wendi asked her about the prolonged absence, the girl replied that alongside the body piercings, she had been learning about other outlets for expression, and that, according to Wendi:

W: ... the wonderful part of her turning to body piercing instead of cutting was she was doing something a little healthier ... she wasn't alone ...

Wendi went on to explain that she is excited to contribute to the changing perceptions of body modification. She says:

W: ... that's the wonderful part of what we do. There's a lot of people who don't see it like that ... they just see trashy tattoos ... but, there's so much more to it that's boosting to people.

When asked about her role in helping people through the modification process, Wendi mentioned that gender is often important to the experience and even surfaces during the decision between a tattoo or a piercing. According to Wendi, men are more willing to get a tattoo than a body piercing, whereas women are more likely to choose a

body piercing. However, the motivations behind the choices vary, with men being more concerned about pain.

W: ...we'll have this guy come in and get this ginormous tattoo ... and you start coming up here enough, you stop people and you're like, 'Let me poke a hole in you, dude.' And, he's like, 'Unuh, I'm more afraid of you then I am my momma.'

In Wendi's experience, men tend to choose more and larger tattoo designs. In contrast, women are often more concerned about the aesthetics of the piece and how individuals in the general public will react to the work they have done. Wendi also explained that women can "be more picky," possibly changing their minds more frequently, or seeking a second opinion about their choice from a friend or shop employee.

In addition to gender, Wendi also explained that choices may be made along ethnic lines. Regardless of race or ethnicity, however, women often tend to come in larger groups than men; however she explained the group dynamic will differ depending on race.

W: ... a big group of white college girls will come in. There's six of them ... there's only one getting something done. If I have a group of six black girls, they're all getting something, and they're all wanting to fight each other for my attention.

Wendi has found that when it comes to tattooing, design choice differs between ethnic groups. While men, in general, tend to pick more literal tattoos, "most white guys ... want a tribal tattoo, or barbwire, or Chinese characters. ... Most black guys ... they'll get names ... or religious tone ... stuff." In Wendi's experience, black women, like black men, often get names or religious designs. When she asked a group of African-American

customers about this one time, they responded that they chose to get names because, “it’s the only thing that means anything,” and expressed the importance of the concrete meaning of the selected tattoo design. According to Wendi, white women, on the other hand, tend to choose work that is more abstract and pictorial. As Wendi describes, her own personal philosophy is that, “... a picture’s worth a thousand words. It says it all, it’s a picture, it’s everything.” This sentiment, in her experience, is often shared and at times expanded on by other Caucasian female tattooees:

W: ...sometimes girls will have a full blown explanation of what they’re getting, what it means, where it came from ... some people get their tattoos and piercings from a dream they had ... which is weird because, for me personally, when I do have dreams of myself I have no tattoos and no piercings.

Wendi points out that she groups prospective customers by the types of modifications they’re interested in getting. There are customers who come in that may be more interested in tattooing, or piercing, or that may be open to anything. Also, there may be customers who start with something small and then expand into larger, more intricate pieces.

Wendi’s strong connection with her customers is coupled with the priority she places on technique and safety. “Technique”, as Wendi explains, is the actual technical and physical ability to pierce a customer, whereas “style” is how she approaches the act of piercing. Although some customers view her as “just poking a hole in somebody” Wendi sees her role as much more involved. When taking into consideration the process involved in piercing a customer she explains that piercing is “not a hurry up get it done” type of experience. Wendi wants to make sure that customers are comfortable throughout

the entire process, from the selection of location, to the act of piercing, to the healing of and possible removal of the piercing:

W: I want to make sure everything is really clear; they know what to do, and know that they can call me. ... I'm gonna feel really bad if someone ever comes in and has a question and I'm like, 'I don't know.' You know what I mean because I'd be like, 'Why am I doing this ... I don't know my ass from a hole in the ground.'

Wendi believes that this knowledge and level of being able to meet the customer's needs has a lot to do with the nature of training that she has received over the period of her career. She explains that learning to be a piercer is more than simple technique, it also involves individual style – individual to both the piercer and the client:

W: ... there are a lot of body piercers ... they'll have someone train them for a couple of weeks on sterility, and they think they're a piercer ... a lot of times they don't even know their sterility quite well. So, striving ... being a very ambitious person has helped ... you're always learning new things and you're always expanding ... there's never a set way to do things. There's a good way and a bad way and sometimes a right way and a wrong way. You want to go the right way for each individual that comes in, so you want to keep the individual in mind before you do anything.

Wendi stresses the importance of being imaginative throughout the modification process in order to provide each customer with the modification they desire while being attuned to what will work for their own unique body. Wendi is trying to pass this understanding on to her apprentice as well.

W: ... you have to look at the aspect of it ... when you're first starting ... you're not as brave as after you've been in it ... and you've got everything down pat. And you can ... the main thing I'm trying to get across to Ashley is you need to

see it already there ... Picture that piercing already in that person's body and imagine what it's doing.

Wendi is also careful when selecting what types of modification she will perform.

Case in point was a particular customer who came to her after having problems with a piercing that was done by another shop:

W: ... I've had kids come in who've had their elbows pierced. It's ridiculous. She came in and she was so mad because her body had rejected them. I'm like, 'Yeah, it's your elbow.' ... There's only so many things that are going to be safe for the human body to handle.

Wendi relates the intricacy of piercings to transplant surgery:

W: ... if somebody needs to get a heart ... or a kidney transplant ... everything has to match up to a precise degree or the body will reject it because it doesn't belong to them and it's not supposed to be there.

She points out that although it has become increasingly popular for piercers to expand into related modification practices like dermal punching, implants, or suspensions, she works strictly with piercings. Wendi says she has been criticized by other piercers in the past who label her as "chickenshit" for not trying the more permanent modification practices. Although she has no problem with the choices that other modifiers make or the range of things they do, she prefers to stay with piercings, which are less permanent, and most often can be reversed with minimal scarring. Wendi includes a magazine article entitled, "You're Not Thomas Edison" in her portfolio which encapsulates her approach to piercing. As she explains:

W: You can do all kind of things to lights. You can make them blue ... you can make them flicker like a candle ... you can make them strobe. But, it's still a light. Someone's already been there and done that. You can maybe do something interesting to it, add to it, but it's already been done.

In addition to her work at Kingpin, Wendi has continued working as a freelance artist. She primarily paints, but works in other media as well (see Figure 2). Wendi sees a definite connection between the work she does freelance and her profession as a piercer because of the level of human interaction required for each. In particular, Wendi sees the ability to critique customer's choices in a constructive manner, keeping in mind the practicality of the piece for each customer and the options available to them, as important to her work:

W: ... you have to, especially with body piercings ... if somebody comes in and wants something that really doesn't suit them you have to be able to tell them ... but, you want to have something as back up ... because of the art school background and knowing proportions ... a lot of times when I see people I see them with piercings in my head, so I can definitely see how those are related.

For Wendi, the involvement of customers is key to her creative process, from seeking inspiration to the actual creation of a piece. When asked to explain her inspiration, Wendi used the example of piercing my ear a few years prior:

W: ... like when you came in with your ear [see Figure 3], it's just like, 'Let me stand here and stare at your ear a little bit and see what's going to look well.' So, a lot of times I get inspired by the individuals themselves, if they're more out there, more conservative ... if they're way out there you can get away with freakier stuff.

Figure 2: *Untitled*; Mixed Media; Year Unknown



Figure 3: My Ear Piercing Done by Wendi



For Wendi, the source of inspiration for piercing is no different than if she were working on her freelance art. As each individual inspires her to create, the process becomes intimately related to the person the work is being done with:

W: A lot of times I get inspired by each individual ... especially my freelance work, I try to get to know the person better ... and then they inspire me to do whatever. Because a lot of times I'll have someone come in wanting paintings and they'll be like, 'I have no idea what I want, but here's the color of my room. Go for it.' Its wide open, so I try to figure out their personality what they do like what they don't like. That kind of thing.

Understanding customer needs can be a challenge. That is, if the customer is not forthright about their needs and wants, or if they are not comfortable with the suggestions that Wendi makes, she can find it challenging to successfully create something that the customer will be pleased with.

W: ...trying to figure a person out. That's the bottom line. Because you can't really ask a person, 'So what kind of stuff you like?' ... 'I don't know.' So, trying to get that, trying to find that real personal thing that clicks in your mind ... and trying to get someone to talk to ya, that's hard to do.

This level of interaction can lead to both the best and worst part of the work environment that Wendi experiences as a piercer. Because every individual who comes in to have work done is different, they will respond to suggestions in different ways, and want different levels of involvement from Wendi when seeking advice. This makes for situation-specific interactions between Wendi and her clients. The biggest challenge is for both parties to be fully engaged, as this is what makes for an enjoyable and successful piercing experience:

W: I love the people, and then you hate the people at the same time. Because you have some people come in and they're just super nice even if they come in and have no idea what they want. But, if they're a nice person in general, it's ok, and you can kind of try to suck that information out of their brain that for some reason they can't say. And, then sometimes you get people coming in who shouldn't be walking in the door yet.

Although Wendi is very comfortable offering suggestions to customers, it is this high level of indecision by customers that can try her patience. She explained that it is particularly difficult if customers ask for advice or suggestions and then don't take it:

W: ... they want me to tell them what they want. I can make suggestions, but I'm not going to tell them. This is the way it works ... girl comes in has a beautiful nose ... perfect for a nostril piercing, and you tell them and they're like, 'I don't know...' So, I look at their ears and its like, 'Oh, you could do your tragus...' and they're like, 'Uh, no that'd hurt.' You know, so ... everything you bring up is 'ew,' so they need to do more research and figure out something. Those are the ones that you know are getting something just to get it and they're going to take it out in a few weeks ... those are the ones that ... don't know what they want yet. Drives you nuts.

Working as a body piercer provides Wendi with a different means to critique her other artistic endeavors, in that the process of self-evaluation occurs in a different way with body piercing than with painting or sculpture:

W: ... I see my body piercing a little bit different than my other work. Because artists are their own worst enemy ... you treat yourself harder than anyone else would. Your perspective on how you feel about a painting will change based on when other people look at it. So, when it comes to a lot of my paintings and drawings I get a little self-conscious. With my piercings unless it's someone who gets something that may not look good on their face or whatever that's the only time I get uncomfortable otherwise.

For Wendi, what is most enjoyable is the success of finishing a piece that not only looks beautiful, but is treasured by the client. The prospect of creating something unique for the individual that they will be happy with is the best part of the process for Wendi:

W: ...finishing the painting ... the sculpture, having them see it. Doing the piercing and having them love it ... the nice thing is that lingers for a while. For example, my best friend came up ... and we did some piercings on her. We tried to do something, kind of like a snuggy but a little different, with more of a conch, something that was more visual. ... So, I asked her how they were doing and she said they were sore but she loved them even more now. So, seeing them and that they're still excited by their piercing. Making people happy.

Because of the long hours spent at Kingpin, Wendi values the limited time that she has off each week. It is important to her that she has separate space for her work and home life. Wendi and her husband intentionally live outside of Greensboro and commute about an hour to and from work each day. Wendi explained that it is difficult for her to travel anywhere in Greensboro without someone recognizing her and wanting to speak with her. While she values the impact she has on others' lives through the work she does, Wendi also wants to have a space where she can be herself outside of being seen as only "Wendi the Body Piercer." As she explains, this separation is difficult to achieve:

W: There's more to me than just being a body piercer, but that's not the part people care about. I don't mean that to sound bad or crappy, but I just wish people would take into consideration that though this is what I do, it's not all I am ... a lot people don't separate that.

Indeed, Wendi has a number of interests outside of the job, and the highest on her list of things to do is spend time with her husband. Although they work together, they have tried to keep their personal relationship out of the Kingpin setting. As Wendi

explains, they do not mind customers knowing that they are married, but that Kingpin is their place of business so they act accordingly and try to maintain the separation, “You’ve got to have the work attitude and then your home life.”

Many of Wendi’s interests are activities that she enjoys sharing with her husband or friends. She enjoys being outdoors, traveling, and cooking. Wendi also likes to read and describes herself as being a book worm as well as a typical ‘girly girl’ “staying up until two in the morning painting my toes different colors picking the right one.” Cooking is a large part of Wendi and Jon’s single day off:

W: We like to cook on the weekends ... these big crazy meals. Because we never get to do that, we’re so used to packing a lunch ... or ordering food in. So, usually on Sundays ... we’ll sleep in a bit, he plays the computer and I read the paper. Then we plan the adventure of ... the grocery store. Usually every Sunday night we’ll have ... friends coming over. That’s something we enjoy the most is hanging out with our friends and making big crazy meals.

However, something as simple as a trip to the grocery store can become difficult. Wendi’s visible modifications often draw attention when she is out. She receives a number of different responses including individuals seeking her advice:

W: ... I can’t go to the grocery store without someone going, ‘I noticed your piercings ... I have this belly button piercing ...’ I can either say no and let them go, but there’s my conscience ... It’s like, ‘Don’t you let that girl walk away ... and not tell her how to take care of it.’ So then I end up getting into a big endeavor when I go to ... the store. It’s really hard to get away from it sometimes.

She points out that she doesn’t mind the questions as much as the lack of acknowledgement about the inconvenience. Wendi explains that she is always happy to

answer questions and help individuals if they would only be respectful of her life outside of work:

W: I've never had people come up to me and say, 'I'm sorry. I know this is your day off, but I have a question...' That would be awesome. They would be recognizing that it's my day off and they're asking me a question. But, it's not like that...

During the fieldwork at Kingpin, I noticed that Wendi's facial piercings often solicited reactions from customers in the store. I asked her if this was common, and if so, how she dealt with such comments. Wendi explained that most people were generally kind about their questions and were often just curious. She stated that sometimes people will say things that may be taken as rude, to this she said, "nine times out of ten people don't mean any harm by it. They've just never seen it, and they really are just lost for words..."

Despite a lot of positive feedback, Wendi has also had to deal with individuals who clearly do not approve of her modifications. Within the shop Wendi will frequently receive negative responses from parents who have come into the store to sign for their children's piercings. She finds it somewhat ironic that these parents are there to allow their children to receive piercings and signing for them. In addition, Wendi feels that if these parents truly do not approve of her, their choice of comments are often very ill-timed, seeing that they are about to trust her to safely puncture their children with a sharp needle(s):

W: ...I'd never do anything to intentionally hurt somebody, I'm not that kind of person, but you'd think ... they'd think, 'She's a friend, but I'm not going to say anything. I'll say this in the car when I'm leaving.'

Wendi mentions being scolded by these customer's parents, who boldly ask what her parents think about her choice of modifications and occupation. This is particularly infuriating to Wendi as she is in her thirties and has been living independent of her parents for some time. In situations like this, Wendi says that she tries to stay cool and remember that often this is more a manifestation of the parent's own anxiety rather than a statement of judgment that is meant to offend. More common are those individuals who outside of the workplace are offensive, such as:

W: ... I'll be standing in line and there's a couple with a three or four year old and they'll pull their kid away. And, it's like, 'Do you really think I look like I'm gonna kidnap your child or wring its neck or something?'

Wendi explains that she has learned to "let it go." Interestingly she says she has a difficult time accepting compliments she receives. Particularly difficult for her is acknowledging the important role she plays in her customers' lives, as she recalls a recent experience:

W: ... we had two girls get their nostrils pierced the other day. It was a mother and daughter. I just think it's so neat because now you have something to connect you. I know in the future when the daughter has a kid they'll be able to say, 'Let me tell you about the time me and grandma got pierced.' And she's like so sweet and they hugged me and took a picture with me and it's gonna go in their photo album. That's the kind of thing that makes me feel really good ... I'm going into their photo album ... but, sometimes taking the compliment that's just difficult because I don't know what to say.

Wendi envisions that her place in the body modification industry, both as a piercer and a modified individual will continue for a long time to come. She talked about her attachment to her modifications as part of who she is today and who she will be in the future:

W: After having them for so long they are a part of who I am. ... There's not a set age group ... Your tastes will change as you get older, so if you decide, you can do other things.

In terms of her future career plans, Wendi intends to spend the rest of her career working in the body modification community. She hopes to move up within the Earth's Edge/Kingpin business in a few years. As she explains, however, she does not plan on piercing forever, in that body modification is a career with an expiration date:

W: This industry is kind of like sports ... you're not gonna see me at sixty years old. It doesn't work that way, once you get to the point your body's like, un uh. ... We worry about arthritis ... carpal tunnel.

Both Wendi and her husband have already started planning for the future when their tattooing and piercing days are behind them. Wendi has a plan to retire by 55, and works with a financial analyst regularly to achieve this goal. In addition, many tattoo artists begin working the "convention circuit and selling flash." Jon has already begun doing this, and both of them seek to increase their freelance art sales in order to further establish their names in the art community. Wendi and Jon have also had conversations with the shop owners about taking over the business after they retire.

Beyond her role within the shop, Wendi also sees herself, and women like her, as being an important part of the present and future of the body modification community. She explains that she feels women bring a level of compassion to the industry that may not necessarily exist among the male employees. In discussing plans for Ashley to work at the Winston-Salem shop, Wendi says:

W: It's funny because the owner ... came up a couple of weeks ago and, even the guys in the shop up there ... were like, 'We need a little estrogen in this shop.' ... Females working in a shop, you know you're always going to see a friendly-type face.

She believes that women can be an integral part of changing the image of the body modification industry. She mentions the shock that some customers experience upon entering Kingpin:

W: ... I have teachers that come in here, and it's funny because a lot of time they're like, 'Gotta tell ya I was a little nervous about coming in here, but I see it's not a scary place.' ... We're not all named Bubba, we don't all ride big Harley motorcycles ... chew tobacco and do drugs and get drunk everyday. We really do see this as an artistic form of living art basically.

Wendi's excitement about seeing the growth in women's involvement in the community as a whole is clear, and evidenced by increased industry activities such as the all-female tattoo convention held annually in Florida that is growing in size every year. She attributes this to the increase in women as clientele:

W: I think that it's women that are really going to make this industry start to thrive ... because most of the people coming in here are women. And that's so cool. It's like, 'Yea! Burn your bra! Yea!' We're trying to make it to where it's

not a male-dominated type of industry, and it's going to take some time, but it's started. And that's cool. I'm proud to be a part of it.

When asked if she learned anything by participating in the research, Wendi says that it provided an avenue for examining her accomplishments over the past decade of her life. She mentioned that this includes a realization about the impact she makes on the lives of her customers:

W: People don't stop and think, 'What have I accomplished...?' And, I'm kind of proud to say I've accomplished a lot here and in my life. ... It's really sweet because I had a client say the other day, 'You're not just my piercer, you're my friend.' I sat back and thought ... I've made a lot of friends in eight and a half years.

Although the research process was nothing new to Wendi, she told me that this was one of most thorough projects she has participated in, explaining that in the past she is generally asked very basic questions. She was particularly pleased that this research went "outside the box" and approached her as a complete person rather than as just a modifier. Wendi's response gave insight into how her perception of the profession had changed during the research process as well. Wendi had never been comfortable calling herself an artist in relation to the work she did as a body piercer, however, throughout the process of this research she has gained more pride and confidence in the work she creates:

W: ... A lot of times before it was like, 'I'm a body piercer. I poke holes in people.' Now I fully feel it's an art form. It's a form of living art. ... And feeling comfortable calling myself an artist ... to be honest with you that is something that's always been a dream for me to consider myself a professional artist and I can actually do that now.

Jenn

Jenn was born on Long Island, New York. She moved to North Carolina with her family at the age of three, and has lived in the Greensboro area since then. Jenn is the second of two daughters; her father is from Detroit, Michigan and is currently working as a business manager for an integrative pain relief therapist. Her mother, from Dearborn, Michigan worked as a nurse and is now working as a clinical analyst. Jenn received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a concentration in sculptural ceramics from Appalachian State University. After graduation, Jenn worked in a number of different jobs, but is now working as a professional body piercer at The Ink Well, an established tattoo and body piercing shop in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Jenn became involved in body piercing at a young age. By 13, she had pierced her ears “a million times”, and recalls her early teenage activity in relation to her decision to become a body piercer: “I’ve always been interested in piercing...when I was younger I pierced my ears...so I knew I had it in me.”² By her 15th birthday, Jenn also had her navel and tongue pierced. Looking back on her experience, Jenn questions the safety of these decisions:

J: ...when I was 13 or 14 I went to a tattoo shop...this was probably a bad idea, since I went underage, to a place that didn’t care that much. But if they don’t care about your age...what else don’t they care about?

Since that time, Jenn, now 24, has received a number of additional piercings and tattoos. A deeply religious person, many of Jenn’s tattoos reflect her beliefs. For instance,

² Interviews were not audio-recorded at the participant’s request.

across her left ribs she has “Arabic writing, and two lotus flowers and a lotus bud above it and the writing means ‘The Glory of God triumphs over evil.’” Jenn further explains that the Arabic writing actually reads, “Bahauallah” who is the founder of the Baha’i faith, of which Jenn is a member. According to Jenn:

J: His name means ‘The Glory of God.’ The name comes up through the seal of the Ottoman Empire, who put Bahauallah in jail. Then three lotus flowers bloom above this in triumph. So, the whole tattoo and the simple version of what it is, ‘The Glory of God Triumphs Over Evil.’

In addition, Jenn has an Om symbol on her right forearm and a sparrow intertwined with a rose on the back of her neck. Jenn’s most recent tattoo is a half-sleeve depicting jungle elements from South Africa including: African flowers such as a Bird of Paradise, an Amazon milk frog, insects, birds including a Woodland Kingfisher and Sunbird, amongst palms and lily pads. Jenn describes this tattoo by saying that although it does not have any special meaning she believes it speaks to her sense of diversity, which is closely related to her religious beliefs. She also points out that:

J: I think I like it because I wear it with confidence. I also love the artwork. And, it may be the newness of it. I’ve only had it for a little over a month and am still finishing it up.

When asked to further explain what she meant by wearing a modification with confidence she responds,

J: There’s a definite difference between more visible tattoos and tattoos you can cover up. Even moving from more visible body piercings to tattoos, it’s different.

Jenn has no plans for additional modifications in the immediate future beyond the completion of her half-sleeve, and the possibility of touching-up, in order to darken the color of the lotus on her ribs. The aesthetic appeal created by the contrast of tattooed and bare skin was important to Jenn:

J: I don't see myself as being covered. I like the look of bare skin in contrast with the tattoos. I don't think I'd ever get my forearms, above my collarbones, or my legs. Definitely not my legs. I like that I can wear a skirt and high heels and not have my tattoos showing. I like the look of a sleek leg in high heels.

Although Jenn does not plan on additional tattoos, her body piercings have continued to be added and removed over time. At the time of the research, Jenn had a number of piercings including: earlobes stretched to a 0-gauge (8mm), both daiths, both surface sideburns, septum at a 12-gauge (2mm), nostril, tongue, double horizontal labret, navel, and hood. Of these piercings, she mentioned that her favorite was her hood, stating, "...honestly I think that every woman should have one. I think it's a sin not to feel what that feels like." Jenn has also removed a number of piercings as well, including numerous cartilage piercings and an eyebrow piercing. Her eyebrow piercing was her least favorite; though she likes it on other people she feels she doesn't "have the face for it." Jenn went on to explain that as a whole, her least favorite piercings tend to be, "anything that isn't done well...they're my least favorite because of poor placement." When describing what piercings were her favorite Jenn states:

J: ... I like my piercings delicate ... even for being a body piercer. The labrets are a bit unlike me and my style but I love them. When they heal up I think I'm going to put some diamonds in them to make them even more delicate. ... A lot of

people like chunky body jewelry. Except for my earlobes nothing's that big and even they aren't that big in terms of stretching ears.

After the research concluded, Jenn obtained dermal punched conch piercings at a 0-gauge, a process that she had photographed and then posted on her Myspace webpage (see Figure 4).

For Jenn, her own modifications, coupled with a background in art is what she believes has helped her in her profession as a piercer. Indeed, she sees piercing as being one "part of the larger art world." While she was in school at Appalachian State University, Jenn worked at the Leather and Silver Gallery making custom leather clothing. She further explains that the level of precision is the same for sewing leather as it is with body piercing, in that the texture is very similar because both are "skin," the difference being that for piercing it is alive, whereas it is tanned for sewing.

Jenn returned to Greensboro after college graduation, unsure as to what her next career move would be. In the profile included on the Ink Well website, Jenn states, "I was not exactly sure what I wanted to do with my career only that I wanted to continue with something artistic." When she returned home, Jenn began teaching art classes to approximately 700 elementary students in the Guilford County School System. She discovered that, despite her love of children and art, the position was not what she had anticipated. She describes the experience as particularly trying when she found herself acting more as a behavioral manager for the children than an art instructor.

Figure 4: Jenn's Dermal Punched Conch



After about five months of teaching, Jenn, knowing a position in the educational system was not for her, left her job. She began working as a bartender and a waitress as she looked around at other career options. After spending free time at the Ink Well, Jenn explains:

J: ...the idea of an apprenticeship came up ... I talked to Joe about it a little bit ... they didn't need someone quite yet. And, after a year, the opportunity arose and, I jumped on it ... and I was super excited for the opportunity ... because ... I've always had ... an interest in it ...

Jenn began her apprenticeship in December of 2005 and had started doing supervised piercings by mid-January 2006. Although there was no expressed commitment for continuing to work at Ink Well after her apprenticeship (see Jenn's workspace, Figure 5), Jenn explained that "it's kinda understood." In the beginning of her apprenticeship, Jenn continued bartending, as she was not getting paid to be trained. The apprenticeship began with a period of observations, including "watching everybody...learning the retail end and how things run." After learning the general tasks needed to run the shop, most of her time was spent following the piercer:

J: ...watching the different piercings and the different ways that they're done ... and the veins and nerves to look for ... learning a lot about anatomy.

Figure 5: Jenn's Workspace



After completing the beginning phase of the apprenticeship, Jenn moved onto supervised piercings. At first she was required to focus on one particular piercing, such as navels. Once she had excelled at these, she was allowed to move on to the more popular piercings, such as tongues and nostrils. She then began to learn less common or more complicated piercings. Jenn's first piercing was a navel, and she recalls that it went pretty well. Although Jenn has completed her apprenticeship, she believes that continuing her training and maintaining professional involvement is an integral part of her career. She has received additional training in first aid, CPR, and blood borne pathogens. Beyond this formalized medical training Jenn believes that research is an important part of continued education:

J: I'm always doing research on the internet, talking to other piercers, and checking out the APP (Association of Professional Piercers) website. It's important to look into trying new techniques, improving my efficiency, or any industry standards that are changing. But mainly it's just learning from experience.

Jenn has also taken on two apprentices, training them to become piercers at other Ink Well locations. I asked Jenn if she has learned anything from the experience of training others. She mentioned that it was more work than she had originally thought it would be and that there was "a lot of teaching", but that her previous work experience had helped her in training the apprentices.

Jenn generally works 48-50 hours a week over a four day work week. Typically, Jenn's work day starts at about 10:30 each morning when she arrives and helps with cleaning, with each employee taking turns on tasks. From here, the rest of the day will

vary depending on the business of the store. If Jenn is not busy performing piercings or helping customers with jewelry purchases she will help out at the front desk. At the end of the night Jenn will make sure all the tools are scrubbed and ready for autoclave sterilization and reuse.

For Jenn, lunch is the best part of her day, because it is a time when all of the shop employees order food together, share their meals, and enjoy each other's company. Each day I was at the site during the research period at least one, if not two, meals were ordered jointly by a number of employees of the shop. Like all workplaces, at Ink Well, there are tensions, stories, and dramas, and a hierarchy to the store. However, all the employees of Ink Well seem to have a very close relationship. When asked, Jenn explains the structure of the shop and her place within it:

J: Rank here is kind of with seniority. I've been here the longest in terms of piercers. Some of the tattooists have been 10-12 years. I've only been here a year and a half. So, I'm kind of low on the totem pole, but at the same time I'm the head piercer, so I kind of rule the piercing world. But, I'm a hard worker and I think that's the biggest part, we're all a team, and if you're a hard worker you get the respect that you're due.

An attitude of a shop can be both a benefit and a detriment to business, and surface as Jenn's most favorite and least favorite aspects of the work environment. Jenn enjoys the laid back attitude, but recognizes that it can sometimes put forth the wrong image to customers seeking something other than body modification:

J: We're professionals about what we do and the work we produce but, this is a field where you can be yourself and have fun. ... People come in here thinking that the shop is somewhere to have a party, but it's a business, not a place to bring the party.

If the rest of the store is slow she will work on a variety of activities, and is often on the computer doing research and networking. Networking through the computer for Jenn is key to making or remaining in contact with other people working in the tattooing and piercing community. She also uses the computer to answer questions that may have been emailed to the store or posted on her Myspace account. Jenn recently wrote an article on rejection and migration in piercings for the first issue of *East Coast Ink* magazine. She was asked to write this piece when the editors found her through her Myspace account. Jenn has also been featured in several magazines when she got her neck tattooed, as part of a piece focusing on the tattoo artist who did the work at the North Carolina Tattoo Convention.

Ink Well has received the 'Best Tattoo Shop' award, a reader's choice award from *Go Triad*, a local newspaper, for the last 10 years. Jenn stated the shop has received the most awards of any studio in North Carolina. She spends much of her down-time at work preparing for the annual North Carolina Tattoo Convention, now in its 13th year.

When customers come in to acquire a body piercing, Jenn prefers not to make any suggestions about the size or location of the piercing, but instead to "inform them of the possibilities...never give them an opinion." However, if the piercing would be difficult due to the shape of the body, she may suggest other options. Ultimately, Jenn believes that she is "here to give them what they ask for," while always keeping safety in mind.

During the research process a customer came in who had previously received a surface piercing on her torso that had rejected. The customer had returned to Jenn to have another similar surface piercing done. In this case, Jenn did offer her opinion: she

recommended that the customer not receive another piercing on her torso. Because it had rejected once, Jenn told the customer, it was likely to reject again. Instead, Jenn offered a number of other options for surface piercings including sideburns, the neck, and the sternum. She particularly recommended the sternum due to its close proximity to the original piercing, and because the customer wanted a “less visible” piercing. However, the customer was not sure as to her preference for any of these locations, and instead opted to get a different piercing entirely, a labret piercing, that she had considered before and she said that she would give more time to deciding what she wanted to do with the surface piercing that she had lost.

In terms of her role in the actual piercing process, Jenn focuses on the steps and the technique of the pierce while also paying attention to the customer’s comfort level. Jenn explains the process of completing a piercing on a customer:

J: ... they tell me what they want, and I help them with their jewelry selection ... Then I verify their ID and set up. Set up would be the lap cloth, Q-tips, scrub or mouthwash, surgical ink for marking, and any tools I need for holding the area, receiving the needle, etc., the needle of course, and matacide to clean the jewelry. In terms of actions, I’ll pierce the client ... place the jewelry ... possibly take a picture for my portfolio. Especially earlier, I took pictures of just about every piercing I did ... now not so much. Then I’ll go over the aftercare, and give them an aftercare sheet and a business card in case they have any questions later.

I observed Jenn to be fairly quiet when piercing customers. Generally she focuses on the process of the piercing and limits conversation with the customer to an explanation of steps such as what it will feel like, placement and piercing process, and then making sure they are feeling ok after it is finished. When dealing with piercings, one of the scarier things that Jenn has experienced is when the customer passes out:

J: You have to get them off the floor, get them a glass of water, let them sit on the couch for a little bit. It's good to have a friend come with them to keep an eye on things like how they're feeling and water.

According to Jenn, men and women react different to piercing:

J: ... women are usually more scared. A lot of times it's just the anxiety ... and dramatization before hand. After it's done most women are like, 'That was all? That wasn't bad?' I think a lot of guys are more quietly afraid.

Jenn sympathized with both, explaining that when she received her double labrets her "heart was beating really fast, but I got through it. Pain is temporary." After mentioning that girls tended to be more dramatic, I asked Jenn if she had more male or female customers. She said she had not really thought about it, however:

J: The most common piercings I do are nostrils and navels, which tend to be more girls ... guys tend to get ears and tongues ... so, maybe more but not necessarily.

When talking about customer's selection of a piercer, Jenn stresses the importance of comfort level created during the experience, regardless of the gender of the piercer or the customers:

J: ... both men and women ... are more comfortable with women than men. But, sometimes it's the opposite, that they're more comfortable with men. Which just means it's good to have both of us out there ... then people can go to who they feel comfortable with ... like the gynecologist, some people like men better, some people like women better. It's good to have the option.

I asked Jenn if there were any piercings that she particularly enjoyed performing. She replied that her favorite piercing was the septum because they were blind piercings,

which are more of a challenge. Septum piercings also hold a special place in Jenn's repertoire as this was the first "one that I did on myself after my apprenticeship." As for her least favorite piercing to complete, Jenn responds:

J: ... maybe navels, which are the most common, but only because a lot of navels are not symmetrical. It's rarely that you see a symmetrical navel, they're usually off and lean a bit, which makes them difficult to mark.

Jenn sees an important relationship between her training in sculpture and her skill as a body piercer:

J: It's helped with my sense of angles and placement and knowledge of the body ... for piercing. Definitely, the more art training you have the better piercer you're going to be.

Jenn further explains that even though it is helpful, it is not necessary to have formal art training to be a successful piercer. Due to the amount of time and space needed to do sculpture Jenn has, regrettably, not been able to work on any pieces recently though she admits that "staying with my art will make me a better piercer."

When I asked Jenn to describe her technique she cited the explanation of piercing she provides to her apprentices:

J: There are a number of different ways to do piercings. I teach them the way I do it, and I want them to do it that way while they're learning. If, after their apprenticeship they find a better way that works better for them that's fine.

Her approach to piercing is technical in nature, and she has recently been tweaking the different variables involved in the process, including the instruments she uses such as

clamps, receiving tubes, and corks as well as how she positions the client. Jenn says that many clients often think the most painful process of the piercing experience are the clamps used to hold the skin in place. To address this, Jenn has started to increase the number of piercings she freehands, that is, completing the pierce without the use of tools.

At this point Jenn has

J: ... gotten to doing navels and eyebrows freehand, and some tongues. But, tongues are difficult to freehand because they're so slippery, so I've been sticking to the clamp.

As for the positioning of customers, Jenn uses the example of septum piercings to explain:

J: ... if you pierce a septum, you can use a clamp, but don't have to. Also, you can position the client in different ways ... upright with their head tilted back, or laying down with their head hanging off the edge of the examining table upside down.

Jenn is also working on developing her repertoire, expanding the range of piercings and body modifications that she will do. Recently, she has started looking into increasing the types of surface piercings she can complete as well as more permanent modification options such as dermal punching and dermal anchoring (see Figure 6).³ These are fairly permanent modifications and are often, though not necessarily, more difficult to reverse than standard piercings. Although she is seeking to expand the range of modifications she can execute, she does so with caution:

³ Dermal punching is a procedure in which a larger portion of flesh is removed than is normally possible with typical piercing methods. Dermal anchoring involves the placement of a bolt-like anchor beneath the surface of the skin to which a screw-like cover can be attached above the skin's surface.

J: I'm being careful because I don't want to do something that could hurt someone. I think on the whole there is some room for discovery, but I'm not that interested. I think some of the new things I've seen are dangerous and others are just stupid. For instance, I recently saw clavicle piercings, where someone had pierced under their collarbone. That's both dangerous and stupid.

For Jenn the process of piercing is an experience that contains positive and negative aspects. That is, she enjoys the high level of customer satisfaction she experiences, however she does not enjoy the necessary redundancy of some of the process:

J: I like that 99 times out of 100 customers leave happy. That's so satisfying, also sometimes when I'll play with the placement of something, and you just get really good placement, that's good. Probably the least favorite is the monotony of pierces. You can put them anywhere, but there are popular ones that we just do over and over again. Then there are the aftercare instructions, they're important, but I just feel like I'm a waitress with them ... 'The sides of the day are...'

Alongside the long hours she spends at Ink Well are the visible modifications that communicate Jenn's involvement in the body modification industry. I asked her if it is important for her to maintain a separation between work and home life. Jenn replied that When she spends time with other Ink Well employees outside of the shop, conversation often turns to work, which can be unwanted at times. She tries to spend down time with the people and doing the activities that are important to her. She cites family, exercise, and religion as things she tries to make time for.

J: It's really hard. It's important that I spend time with my family because we're very close. Most of my friends are late night people, so every so often I go out with them. I like to go to the gym in the mornings before work, and possibly go to a yoga class on my days off.

Figure 6: Dermal Anchoring by Jenn



Jenn also mentions the importance of practicing her faith, celebrating diversity on a daily basis, and attending meetings at the Baha'i Center.

As she became more modified and became a modifier herself, Jenn faced changes in her interactions with others. Within her work environment one particular point of view seems to prevail:

J: A lot of people have one or two piercings and think it's a big deal and that they're being rebellious. But, to have a ton of modifications is still taboo, in our environment it's not taboo. For us, it's the opposite, if you aren't tattooed that's crazy ... I rebel by being conservative. People joke that I look too innocent to work here, and I love it ... it's always been important to me to be unique, and have things that not everyone else does. I think that just shows my stubbornness.

According to Jenn, her parents were not immediately supportive of the decision to become modified and to work as a body piercer:

J: At first my parents were pretty unhappy. But, then they saw that I was happy and successful and they calmed down a lot. When I got my first tattoos my mom was really emotional and would cry. But, she's become more accepting, she still loves me, and we still get along. My parents are a little nervous about the whole thing and aren't completely on board but it doesn't hurt our relationship or anything.

Jenn's experiences with interpretations in the community at large have on the whole been positive, however, some people have been less receptive to her dress choices than others.

J: I worry about discrimination sometimes, but for me no. I have always been my own person. I do what I can to be a good person and still look the way I look. Sometimes people confuse the two. Particularly, it seems like I get that reaction from the extremely religious, particularly here in the Bible Belt in the South. Though it can be any religious extremists, not just Christians, though that's what seems to be around here.

I asked Jenn if she believed that, despite the increasing numbers of individuals receiving modifications, they would maintain their perceived rebelliousness in the future:

J: I think so. It will still be rebellious regardless of the increase in numbers of people getting them. I think that the perception that it's sacrilegious has a lot to do with the perspective.

Jenn found my academic interest in the body modification industry to be valuable in shedding light in an often misunderstood professional field. She did find the research process a little difficult. Jenn was uncomfortable with the idea of being “watched all the time” and being audio-taped for the interview was nerve-racking. However, she felt that as the research process progressed the interaction became easier. Although Jenn was knowledgeable about the industry and was able to discuss the possible future development of the field, she told me that she found it difficult to speak of her own career in the future-tense. Jenn is currently “happy and fulfilled” with the work she does. For the short-term, she hopes to continue expanding her knowledge base through networking, “research, and the Association of Professional Piercers.” For the long-term, Jenn is less sure, not because her current employment situation, but more because of her personality:

J: I'm not really sure if this is a career. But, I'm like that. Even with my degree I didn't really know what I wanted to do with it. I'm kind of a ‘fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants’ kind of girl.

Amy

Amy was born in Forst, Germany, near the Polish border, where she lived until 1997. Amy is an only child; her father, now deceased, was originally from Müllrose, her mother, from Forst, is a retired textile designer. In 1997, Amy moved to Berlin where she studied at the free University of Berlin. She majored in North American Studies and minored in Mass Communications, Film Science, and Theatre Science. In 2003, Amy moved from Berlin to Raleigh, North Carolina where she currently lives with her husband, a chef with a focus on vegan/vegetarian cooking. She has been tattooing for over two years now, and is currently working at Phoenix Tattoo and Art Gallery in Raleigh, North Carolina (see Figure 7).

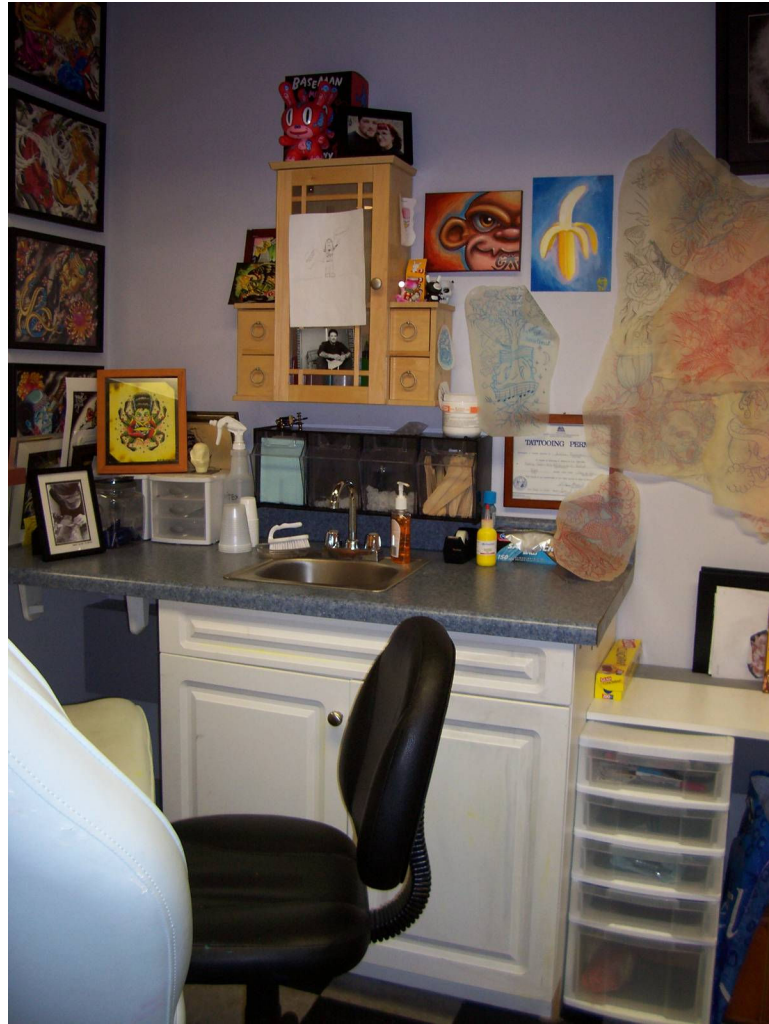
Amy received her first modifications in 2001 at the age of 23. It was at this time that she also received her first, and only, piercings on her earlobes. Amy stretched her earlobes to a 4 gauge (5.0 mm), but has since let them close to the standard size, between a 14 and 16 gauge (1.6 and 1.2 mm). Although she remembers the piercer as friendly and competent, the overall experience was difficult:

A: My friend did it ... I hated it. He was a professional piercer ... this old biker guy. I was really scared ... but he was super sweet. It wasn't really bad, but I just didn't like it ... I had it done in Florida it was really humid, so I had a hard time healing.

I asked Amy if this first experience affected her overall interest in piercings or if it just was not for her. She explained that it was more about a personal, aesthetic choice:

A: ... it's just not for me. ... I mean it's pleasing to the eye for some people; it's just not my cup of tea.

Figure 7: Amy's Workspace



During the same year that Amy got her ears pierced she also received her first tattoo. During the six years since that time Amy has acquired tattoos on her lower and upper back, chest, left arm, left leg, right leg, wrists, behind her right and left ears, and on her right index finger. Her first tattoo was a sacred heart with wings and roses about which she said:

A: ... it's definitely cheesy, but I think it's really well executed, and it's the first tattoo I got so I was lucky.

I asked Amy if any of her tattoos had particular meaning for her. She explains that her chest tattoo, which she received in 2002, is the most meaningful tattoo she has:

A: ... It's a heart and it says 'Dad' and it's ... for my mother who's an artist. ... I figured it was a nice tribute to him. You know, getting something really close to my heart. ... It sounds cheesy, but ... it has meaning for me.

Amy also points to the sleeve on her left arm that she received between 2003 and 2004, and explains that this tattoo is particularly meaningful because it 'tells a story':

A: ... it's the story of Poseidon. ... I got that because when I was in high school ... I had my last exam in Greek mythology and I did very well.

Amy also adds that several of her tattoos were received for a number of different reasons, including a number of "groupie type things" saying that:

A: ... when you're in the industry you're exposed to a lot of good work, so it makes it really hard to pick. I guess everyone has a collector's leg or a collector's arm where they get work done.

In 2004 she began a tattoo with wings on her leg. Work on this leg continued throughout 2005, and it now includes a peacock, panther, squirt gun, rocket ship, as well as the water tower in her hometown of Forst. In addition, she acquired one of cherry blossoms behind her left ear. In 2006 Amy acquired tattoos of an eagle, Germany tattoo on her right leg, Cookie Monster behind her right ear, lettering reading “my law” and “my vow” on her right and left wrists, a mustache on her right index finger, and a peony tattoo that remains unfinished.

I asked Amy if there were any tattoos that she particularly disliked. She stated that she has one from when she was training to become a tattoo artist that she is not too fond of. She explains that not only does it remind her of the time spent training; but that her changing personal style related to design choice is also a factor. Although she has considered getting it removed, she probably will not, because it is “something she decided to get,” and therefore is important to her:

A: It’s something my old boss did. ... It’s just something I drew ... it’s not very good. It reminds me of my so-called apprenticeship. ... I know if I drew it now it’d be a lot better. That’s the best example that I would never get anything that I drew myself ... because my taste changes and my style changes constantly, so I hate it. I really want to get it lasered. But, I doubt I will.

During the research process, Amy received a tattoo of a Japanese girl with a flower and lantern. This newest tattoo is currently her favorite because, “It’s really different from everything else that I had, and I got it from a good friend of mine.”

I asked Amy if there were any modifications she was hoping to get in the next two to three years, to which she responded, “YES please!” She would like to get her right arm

done as well as other things. Amy said that with so many great tattoo artists in the industry she would like to collect work from a number of them.

Amy has no formal art background but she was exposed to art at a young age. She explained that both of her parents were artists; her father worked as a graphic designer and her mother as a textile designer. However, as Amy recalls her parents were not enthusiastic about her own artistic pursuits:

A: ... I wasn't allowed to go to art school, 'cuz my mom thought I wouldn't make any money. So, I went to school for English instead, and now I get to do what I like.

I asked Amy what led her to a career as a tattoo artist. For her it was a combination of interests in both tattooing and drawing. However, Amy adds that though she was interested in tattooing, a sketch artist does not necessarily make a successful tattoo artist:

A: ... I got my first tattoo ... I was just drawing and drawing. ... Eventually people were like, 'Well, I want to get a tattoo, can you draw it for me?' So, I started ... looking back they were horrible, but ... people liked it. And, I was like; if I draw them it's just the logical thing to think ... maybe you can do them.

However, she explains that though a natural artistic ability is important to the development of a tattooist's skill it is not absolutely necessary:

A: ... I think artistic ability, of course, you have to have some. ... Just because you draw, doesn't mean you can make it as a tattoo artist. I think that's how a lot of people get into it. They think they can draw and they draw a couple of tattoos for their friends, and they think that makes them eligible for being a good artist, and it really doesn't. ... There are tattoo artists who can't necessarily draw really well, but they can apply a flash piece really smooth and clean.

When I asked her to describe the characteristics an individual must have in order to be a successful tattoo artist, she replied that both confidence and the ability to work with people were critical:

A: ... It takes a lot of confidence because you're being put in a stressful situation every time. ... I get nervous every time I tattoo, and I think that's important because it doesn't make you cocky ... it makes you aware you're doing a very particular job. ... I think it takes a lot of patience because you're dealing with people ... that let you change their bodies permanently. ... You need to pay attention and have your heart in the right spot. I always tell people I'd rather be tattooed by someone who's not completely perfect, but who I can sit and talk to for a couple of hours ... instead of someone who's a perfect artist, but he's an asshole.

Amy has other artistic interests, which she believes helps her with some of the steps in tattooing:

A: ... I just take a lot of stuff home with me and draw at home. ... I'm working on flash, so painting a lot. ... I think painting helps a lot; it really gives me a feeling for certain things. ... Especially watercolor ... I think it's really similar to tattooing because you lay the black down first, then you move onto other stuff, then you do your white highlights last.

Amy derives inspiration for her work from a number of different sources, including talking to other artists, reading books, or searching websites. Amy mentions one particular source of inspiration for her:

A: ... for Christmas I got this book, it's called *Oceans*, or something. It's ... this huge book and it's got ... everything you could ask about on oceans and has all these different pictures. It makes me want to do a series of paintings, or something, just on ocean life.

For Amy, after finding inspiration, the creative process usually takes place through a series of sketches. She finds it somewhat difficult to explain the process however:

A: ... I have a basic idea. I do research on the computer most of the time that's gonna help me. Then I start doodling ... they're so great, you can use so many different layers of lines and come from a really rough shape to a more defined shape. Then, I use a darker pen, to do the actual sketch.⁴

In terms of her favorite part of the creative process Amy finds it difficult to narrow it down to just one:

A: I actually like the whole process because I love drawing. The whole process is really my hobby that became my job ... and I like basically like everything about it.

Her least favorite parts of the process are when unforeseen things cause problems with sketching, or with fitting a tattoo design to a customer:

A: ... if something doesn't fit I hate that ... if it's a great design and it doesn't fit because it's too long or wide, that's always a little nerve-wracking ... If my pencil breaks constantly or my eraser smears like crazy. Just little things like that.

Amy sees her abilities as constantly evolving. She seeks to improve her artwork through consulting with friends, focusing on more conventional forms, and by setting goals for herself:

⁴ The creation of a tattoo begins with the artist sketching the design to be tattooed. Once the design is finalized it is transferred to a carbon paper. The artist will select the needle sizes and ink colors to be used and set up their work station. Then the customer's skin is prepped by cleaning and shaving the surface. The design is transferred from the carbon outline previously made. The artist generally begins the tattoo with the outline work and then fills in color followed by the shading to complete the tattoo.

A: ... I still don't know much about technical stuff, unfortunately. But, I've started painting and I have a lot of friends I get in touch with and learn from. I think as you get comfortable with it your hand becomes more steady and you learn the little tricks we use in order to improve, like your linework, which is the biggest thing for me. I want to have really good linework and good color. And, especially painting helped with that, like knowing where to put shading and what colors to use. I used to try to sit down beforehand and figure out what colors to use, and now it comes to me ... It's just more ... training your brain, it's more natural, the whole process.

Amy finds it difficult to describe in detail the work she does. She thinks it is because she does not often have to explain her fairly well-known occupation. But, she does see her work as a part of the larger art world:

A: ... I consider myself an artist. I just work on a different type of canvas, a moving canvas that's not sitting still, its breathing. It's ... a very tedious kind of art because people always think it's a no-no. But, I think it's one of the hardest art forms ever because you always have the stress of it being permanent. ... You basically change someone's life ... it's very stressful like that. ... But, I love it. I wouldn't have it any other way, but you have to push yourself everyday.

Amy finds it a little easier to discuss her preferred style of tattooing, which she sees as similar to her technique. She believes that developing a unique style is more difficult now because most things have already been done before:

A: ... I think nowadays everyone is striving to find their style, which I think ... is really hard because everything has been done. ... If someone says, 'Oh, you've been ripping me off.' Well, you've been ripping off someone else ...

Amy has styles she prefers and is particularly interested in doing traditional pieces and pieces that are more imaginatively driven (see Figure 8):

A: ... I like to do really colorful and bold tattoos, like American ... and Japanese traditional because I think it's a challenge. Because ... with American traditional everyone's like, 'It's really simple,' ... but I disagree. Because it's really simple it has to be very strong ... so you can do that with really dramatic color or shading. ... I like doing Japanese traditional ... because you really have to understand and learn a lot about how the body flows ... what looks good and where and that's really challenging from an aesthetic point-of-view.

However, she also recognizes that since she is still relatively new to tattooing it is important that continue to expand and improve her style. There are particular areas that she is less interested in than others:

A: ... I haven't really been tattooing for that long and ... everyone is striving for their style. ... I've never really had to do a lot of black and grey, so I'm not really excited about doing those things. I guess I should be open to doing that and realistic things, but it will all come in time.

Where her style would go in the future was difficult for Amy to guess, but she did discuss how her style is often affected by her surroundings. In particular, she explains how at Phoenix each of the artists brings something different to the overall shop skill set and this creates a unique and enjoyable work environment:

A: ... it just depends how your personal style changes, your surroundings, who you work with. ... Sometimes if you work with a certain person and you really adore some of the things they do you may start to do some of it without even realizing it. ... I think that everyone has their little niche, and it's good to have a variety of interests in a tattoo shop, because then you don't have that much competition going on, and it's neater. ... Everyone can learn from ... and get input from everyone else.

Amy feels the shop environment at Phoenix is very egalitarian, made up of a variety of artists who all bring varied and valuable skills to the workplace:

Figure 8: Owl Tattoo by Amy



A: ... I think even though there's a manager ... everyone is really on the same level. The manager does a little bit more, but we share responsibilities. I think that everyone is on the same level and nobody's looked down to. It's three completely different artists ... different approaches ... so it's a good mix. ... Since there's two girls, that's nice; you don't have that too often. ... We all have good senses of humor and get along really well, so it's a really good working environment.

When I asked Amy to tell me about the positive and negative aspects of the work environment, she found it a challenging question because the good heavily outweighs the bad:

A: ... I just feel so lucky to be able to do something that I feel so passionate about and like so much as a profession. ... I think it's just because you're being so grateful just for the opportunity that the little things that you may not like ... they are so unimportant or so minimal that you just don't think about them.

Before working at Phoenix tattoo, Amy apprenticed and then worked at a shop located in a suburb of Raleigh. She recalls that shop as lacking in the necessary support and instruction that she would have liked to have had during her apprenticeship:

A: ... It was just very short. ... I've always heard apprenticeships cost money and take a couple of years. Mine didn't cost money ... was like three months and I didn't learn anything. I was just cleaning and helping with setting up and drawing, but all of a sudden I was just thrown into it. ... I had just been watching ... I hadn't really learned anything about the technical aspect. ... I started tattooing because they needed more people to work there ... and I was a girl, so they were like, 'Ok Amy, you do it.'

I asked Amy about the first time she remembers tattooing, which was on herself:

A: ... We'd been tattooing grapefruits and other objects, but never a living thing. So, I just sat there for a half an hour; I didn't know how to go about it and then I started. And, it was actually pretty good because with the needle you can twist it

so it doesn't hurt so much. So I kind of figured out how to hold it so it wouldn't be as unpleasant and stuff.

After tattooing herself, Amy moved on to tattooing friends in order to develop her skills:

A: ... After that it was mostly one of my good friends, because he had a lot of crappy work so it wasn't like I couldn't make it any worse than it is. ... And, it took so long to heal and I was really worried, and he was really worried. ... It healed up fine it was just one of those first things.

She spent most of her time in the shop tattooing friends and doing small pieces for customers. Soon after, and sooner than Amy liked, her boss started her on larger pieces when her schedule allowed, which she recalls as very challenging. Amy remembers well the first pieces she did after officially completing her apprenticeship:

A: I was drawing a lot of things for friends and friends of friends. ... I did ... a diamond with two cherubs around it. That was my first big thing. ... Then I did a geisha on my husband. That actually turned out fairly well. And, looking at them now ... I can look at them. I know I could do better now, but they're not ... totally horrific.

Amy believes continued training is an important part of her growth as a tattoo artist. Early in her career she took a seminar from Guy Atchison – a noted tattoo artist – at a convention in Richmond, Virginia. However, Amy feels that it was too early in her career to be able to glean anything usable from the experience. As she has become more experienced at tattooing, she is less comfortable with attending seminars, “because I feel like it's that person's personal taste that they teach you about, which I think is a little weird.” Amy has worked both the 2005 and 2006 North Carolina Tattoo Convention, and

has visited several others in locations such as Charlotte, North Carolina, Richmond, Virginia, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Although Amy does not actively attend seminars, she believes that learning on a daily basis is crucial to longevity in the industry. She uses a number of different methods available to make sure she is always learning and challenging herself to improve:

A: ... You learn everyday ... if you think you stop learning you should quit because you ... stagnate. ... I think you learn everyday just from watching different people, even looking at magazines. Reading other peoples take on certain techniques. Just trying out new stuff. New colors, new inks, new brands of needles, or new machines...

In addition, in 2005, Amy had flash pieces she designed published in *Skin & Ink* magazine, as well as an interview in *Tattoodles*, an online magazine, in January 2007 (<http://www.tattoodles.com>). She hopes to continue publishing her work and is always looking to submit pieces for awards, publications, conventions, and other outlets within the tattooing community.

Amy's daily life at Phoenix tattoo varies depending on the business of the day. On busier days like Fridays and Saturdays, preparedness is the key. On these days, Amy will make sure she is set up the night before and has her drawings ready for the day's appointments. She checks the appointment book, helps customers when they come in, and works on drawings when things are slower. Amy also works on her painting (see Figure 9) when the shop is slow in order to practice the skills that she uses when tattooing:

A: ... I try and paint. It's really good practice for tattooing ... you get a much better imagination ... where to put different colors ... where to put shading. ... I really like to paint or at least draw ... When you learn how to ride a bike you will always know how to ride a bike, but sometimes you get a little rusty, but once you get on the bike again, it works. It's the same with drawing; you really have to train your brain and it becomes easier to imagine certain things.

Amy's favorite part of her job is the people that she gets to meet on a daily basis.

She said that this can be from an artistic, inspirational perspective:

A: ... I'm constantly being bombarded by other people's work ... and I like that because I feel like that's important as an artist. ... That's something I'm really excited about because this industry really pushes you to get better and better.

Amy thinks that this inspiration comes from both the competition and camaraderie created by the networks of the tattooing community:

A: It's such a highly competitive business that you really need to be extremely good. ... I like that and I like the traveling aspect that you can network. ... That you can meet a lot of people ... through conventions ... guest spots ... the computer. It's really easy to make friends and bonds through the tattoo business. ... Then you get to do guest spots and you get to go to different states and different countries ... you're a part of different galleries; it's just really exciting.

Amy also finds the relationships she develops with her customers to be an important and enjoyable part of her work:

A: I love working with people. ... In general, you meet a lot of interesting people ... you get to hear a lot of interesting stories. ... It's like sometimes you end up being the psychologist; just listening. ... There's this trust bond relationship that starts ... I guess it's because you have such a big impact on them physically that they feel like they can open up to you. Sometimes it's a little overwhelming, but in general, I like that.

Figure 9: *Until Death*; Watercolor; Year Unknown



Her role in tattooing customers is something Amy takes very seriously, not only in terms of the immediate experience of being tattooed, but in terms of how the customer relates to their tattoo for as long as they have it:

A: I feel like you have a lot of responsibility ... because you're changing someone's appearance forever, and it's something that they're going to remember for the rest of their lives. So, if I make this a ... pleasant experience, then they have something to look back on. If I'm mean to them; if I don't make it comfortable, anything that's ... a negative thing, this will be a negative experience for the rest of their life. So, I feel like you really change someone's life in a really important way.

In dealing with customers' choices, Amy will help the clients with whatever they might need. She explains that the level of her involvement in their choice will vary, depending on the customer's decision-making process. Some customers may come in and select a piece of flash and it is as simple as recreating the work for the customer. Other customers will come in with an idea and Amy has to decide if their idea will work. She talks to them about any changes in order to improve the design, and then she may draw something up. If the customer has no idea what design they want, Amy will typically suggest that the customer take a look at all the artists' portfolios and talk with the artists to get an idea of what might work. However, Amy places importance on establishing trust with the customer, regardless of what their unique needs are:

A: ... There's two different types of clients. The one group is people who don't really care too much about their tattoo, or it's their first tattoo. So, they're looking through the flash rack and they just want to pick something. You probably do their first tattoo and this is where some sort of ... trust bond starts. ... You do a solid tattoo on them and next time they'll come back and ... they might let you draw something for them. There are other people who come in ... and someone referred them ... or they've seen your work ... and they'll give me a lot more

freedom. ... Once the relationship really starts if they like it or get a larger scale piece and they keep coming back. They they might not even say what they want they'll just come in and say, 'This is the part of my body that I want work on.' Which is really hard for me because you need to give me a certain idea, but it's something that happens because people really start to trust you and spend time with you and then they're really open to you doing whatever you want, so you really can't tell.

I asked Amy if she was comfortable with giving a customer suggestions if the tattoo he or she chooses was not right for them. She was originally apprehensive about the possibility of offending customers, however, she has since become more comfortable with making suggestions, as it is often in the customer's best interest:

A: ... It took me a while, but I'd much rather be honest with a customer. But, I'm still polite but, I'll tell them if certain things won't work because their lines will bleed over time. And I think as long as you're respectful to a customer and explain it to them in a manner that they will understand why then they are receptive to it. So, it's like any other profession, it just really matters how nice you are to someone and how you carry yourself.

Amy further explains that though gender rarely plays a role, other factors affect her ability to provide advice, such as the age of the customer or whether they came to the shop alone:

A: ... I almost feel like the younger they are the more of an expectation level there is. ... It's really weird. ... They're very ... they don't want to change their minds or anything really ... If people come by themselves; they are more likely to be convinced. Not necessarily convinced, but more likely to listen to you than if they brought a partner. For example ... because she'll always be like, 'What do you think?' And, I'm like, 'Actually, it's your tattoo. What do you think?'

Gender relations for Amy can really only be spoken about in generalizations.

Amy finds that men may be more comfortable with a female artist, but that they can become too comfortable:

A: ... Guys react well to female tattoo artists because we're more approachable. ... Unfortunately you still sometimes have this whole sexist thing ... where guys tend to think if you're a girl they can be more rude to you which ... hasn't really happened. It's just sometimes I get some comments that I could live without.

She finds that women take the pain of the tattoo better than men, but some women make more of a show about the ordeal than men:

A: ... Women are tougher than men when it comes to pain tolerance. I've never had a woman pass out on me, but I've had a guy pass out on me. ... But if I have a whole group of girls ... they're 19, 20, 21 ... if I have a whole group come in it becomes a big ... production, with a lot of screaming and, 'Ow, that hurts' and that kind of thing. So, I think just from that point of view, girls, I'm not going to say women, but girls are a little harder to deal with.

Amy is always concerned about making sure she provides customers with a pleasant experience. She will stay late or take work home in order to work with customers. For example, during the research period, she scheduled an appointment for a customer who was flying in from California to have work done. She made sure that her schedule was clear so the customer could get his tattoo completely done on this visit, and would not have to make a return trip. She explains:

A: I would much rather take my time with something than have to rush. And, I have a lot of people from out of town, and I would feel bad if I had to make them come back.

When trying to get a little extra work done, Amy often finds herself bringing drawings home:

A: It's just sometimes I procrastinate and so I have to bring stuff home. It's just easier to do if I'm sitting at home. ... Especially if my husband's home, then at least I'm not by myself ... So, I don't like doing it because I feel like I get sidetracked with T.V. and stuff, but if I have to I have to. But ... big things ... we have the perfect light table [in the shop]. If it's big I try to do it here. I try not to do too much at home unless it's small stuff that I can really knock out in a couple of hours.

She does not feel too bad about it, explaining that many people end up bringing work home, regardless of their profession. Amy finds that after working with customers all day it is nice to be able to relax at home. She enjoys watching movies and has recently taken up knitting. She also finds that reconciling work and home life can be difficult given her unusual schedule:

A: ... I try on the days that I have off, just to leave them open. ... It's really hard; you have this ... weird schedule. You start at noon, you get done at ten, there's not a lot you can get done in the morning. ... The days we have off, it's one weekend day and one weekday, so those are perfect, so I try not to do anything on those days. ... It's really tough because I have a lot of friends who don't understand, and eventually think you don't want to hang out with them but I just don't have the time. Most parties are on Fridays or Saturdays and I have to work and if I'm here longer than ten I'm here for longer than ten.

Amy realizes that going out can be important for networking, but in her spare time she really enjoys spending time relaxing at home. Still, she finds that separating work and home life can be difficult, regardless of whether she is bringing work home or not:

A: I don't think this is a job where you can leave your work. Even if I don't have any work to do, if I go out at least one person is going to ask me some job related

question. ... If you're the type of person who likes to separate private life and job, this is not something you should do.

I asked Amy if she finds it difficult going out in public since so many people often have questions. For her it depends on their approach:

A: ...If they're respectful, then I'm the last person who's not going to want to answer a question. But there's a lot of rude people depending where you go, obviously. ... Like, if people just grab you and not even ask, 'Hey can I see that?' They just grab you. Or, they ask how much something is going to be and you can't tell them. You're like, 'I'm a tattoo artist, yes, but I can't tell you how much it's going to be unless I see it.' Immediately asking that of you when they've just met you. It's annoying, but it happens.

Amy explains further that often the success of these interactions has a lot to do with her own personality and how she approaches the situation:

A: I think if you carry yourself in a very friendly and approachable way then people are going to react positive to you. ... If you act snobby and hard to approach then of course people are going to be like, ugh.

Amy has experienced some negative reactions as well:

A: I have sometimes a couple of negative things, like when people whisper behind your back. You get the typical, 'What if you get older?'. Or, if sometimes you go shopping in certain stores, people will automatically think you're going to steal something. So, people make it really hard for you to feel comfortable in the environment.

However, Amy finds that these reactions are fairly rare, and that generally her interactions with people are very positive.

Beyond her interactions with individuals in public, I asked Amy if she believes that the people she is close to, such as her mother or husband, perceive her occupation in a particular way and if this is important to her. Amy responded that it was very important to her. Amy particularly values her husband's artistic opinion of her work, "he has nice tattoos, so I want him to like my stuff because he has good taste, and I want him to be supportive." She also spoke of how her work related to contributions made around the household.

A: I want my husband to be proud of me because I want him to respect my job as much as I respect his. I want him to think of me as an equal in the household, and that's tough because I don't have a 9 to 5 job that has a set income ... It's not that it's necessarily a rivalry or a competition, but I still want to contribute as much as he does.

Amy explains that the level of financial uncertainty in the tattooing profession is often difficult to deal with and may be the least favorite part of her job:

A: ... I'm not that established as an artist, just yet, you don't have a steady paycheck. ... When you're starting a family, buying a house, without a steady income it's really hard to plan for all that. You really can't count on a steady paycheck every week. ... But, it's never been that bad of a situation with me, where I've really had to worry so much.

Amy believes that what is most important has been taken care of:

A: ... So far, I haven't had any bad experiences. My parents are proud of me. My husband is happy with what I do. I have repetitive customers, so I guess they're happy. So, that's what matters. As long as they're happy and I get to do ... something I really really want to do I'm set.

However, there are some aspects of the job which her family dislikes. Although her parents are proud of her, they did not necessarily immediately understand her unusual choice of profession. Her husband, though proud of her and the work she does, can sometimes be upset by customers who may not always act appropriately:

A: My husband has a problem sometimes because I do sometimes have male customers that can overstep boundaries once in a while. But, most of the time I'm able to handle myself and I know how to deal with it.

In terms of most customers, Amy finds that while some people specifically look for female tattoo artists because they feel more comfortable with them, most "people just take it for what it is." She sees the "whole female thing to be a big deal once in a while."

On the industry level, Amy believes that every female tattoo artist has to deal with how achieve acceptance differently, and that gender can be used by some tattooists to gain some level of success in the community, whether they are men or women:

A: ... Honestly, if you're dressed up nicely and you're really flirty with a customer, you get a bigger tip. ... I think it's more so with women. If you have a certain effect on someone, why wouldn't you use it? ... But, I think there's a boundary and I think there's still people that don't see that unfortunately.

However, she feels that women rely on their gender more frequently given the male-dominated industry:

A: ... I think there's tattoo shops that hire girls because they think that they really help sell. They think ... we've got a girl. She's kind of pretty, has a nice figure on her that they'll likely bring in guys. ... There's a tattoo shop in Philadelphia that is only women and they're booming because they're only women.

Amy stresses the fact that while many women may think they need to portray themselves as all “girlie and bubbly” she doesn’t believe this to be necessary. Amy instead wants to be evaluated as a tattooist and on her artistic ability, and recalls the best compliment she ever received as an artist:

A: ... The nicest compliment I’ve ever gotten, and I know this sounds weird, a guy told me, ‘Amy, you tattoo like a guy.’ Which just means that just by your work, you can’t tell if a guy or girl did it; it should all be the same.

However, Amy also mentioned that due to the nature of the tattooing industry women have to be talented and self-assured in order to be successful:

A: ... I guess women are still ... the minority. I think there’s just a handful of female artists that have the confidence and the artistic ability to make it ... to make a name for themselves. ... It’s a male-dominated industry; you really have to have a lot of confidence to put up with all of the guys. ... Because there’s a lot of ego and a lot of drama ... there’s a lot of really old school tattoo artists ... so I think the women are struggling with it.

Amy feels that she has been lucky in her training having been taught by a number of people who were willing to help her on her path. But again, she stresses that this relates back to the character of the individual artist:

A: I feel really lucky. I’ve been helped by a lot of great tattoo artists and it didn’t matter to them that I was a girl. I guess if you really show the dedication and the drive, they’ll help you.

Overall, Amy found the research process helpful both on a personal and professional level: “it’s ... a good way to see how I myself feel about my job.” In terms

of her daily life, Amy was reminded how much she truly enjoys the sense of personal satisfaction her career has given her:

A: ... I realized that when I'm nagging about certain things they're just so minimal that I just shouldn't. ... Overall, I'm lucky. I should be grateful. First of all I have a job; I get to work with nice people and I get to do something I love. So, those are things that are really valuable.

Amy felt that the research process was valuable because it helped to shed light on the industry for those who may not necessarily be a part of it:

A: ... It's almost like you have someone who's not really involved in the tattoo industry and, it's nice to see that someone like that is interested. And, I feel if more people were like that and more people are like that it's going to make my job so much more exciting, and so much more busy.

Lacie

Lacie was born in Manistee, Michigan where her family remains today. Lacie is the second child and has an older brother, Josh. Her father, a self-proclaimed "professional bum," is from Manistee, Michigan and operates his own business, Plain Crazy Racing. Lacie's mother, originally from Onaway, Michigan is a computer technician in the public school system. In 1998, Lacie left Manistee to attend college at Michigan State University in Lansing; she studied art and psychology for four years until she moved to Australia in 2001. After a brief six months spent in Australia she moved back to Lansing where she lived until moving to North Carolina in 2003. Lacie has been tattooing for about six years now, and is currently working at Phoenix Tattoo and Art Gallery in Raleigh, North Carolina.

When she was 10 she got her first ear lobe piercing, and by her early teens, Lacie had begun getting other body piercings. She started with second and third holes in her earlobes at 14 years old, at which time Lacie pierced her own navel, as well as her nipples. After leaving for college she had her tongue pierced. At 19, Lacie got her labret pierced twice. Then, she traveled to Seattle and pierced both of her eyebrows and had an industrial piercing on her right ear in the same sitting. Multiple piercings in a single sitting is not very common, particularly with industrials, because they can be painful. Lacie also had her septum pierced, but does not remember when it was done.

At one point Lacie had a total of seventeen piercings, but has since removed four of them. She removed both of her eyebrows and one of the labret piercings feeling them to be “a little over the top” because they were pierced crooked, and because they were a little too much for her personal taste. In addition, Lacie took out her septum piercing because approximately two months after the piercing it turned cold and the jewelry repeatedly froze to her nose.

In addition to her piercings, Lacie has acquired numerous tattoos over the past ten years. She explains her design choices:

L: I have a lot of tribal ... I just thought the designs were good on the body done proportionally and properly. I have some ... artwork by my friends and two or three pieces that are artwork I really like. ... I have two pieces that are flash work ... not really happy about having flash on me, but I'm one of the few artists I've ever met that doesn't have a single cover-up ... everything I've got is something that I've always had. I like to do things in solid black or black and grey.

Lacie also has a number of tattoos covering her back, legs, arms, wrists, and neck. She received her first tattoo at 17 and recalls the experience:

L: ...my parents bought me my first tattoo. ... I knew after getting a little teeny tiny kanji ... I was hooked on it. It was the first time I ever watched a tattoo being done ... I thought, 'Oh that's so cool, I've got to learn how to do that ... it's great!'

For Lacie, this original tattoo is one of her least favorites, along with a piece of flash on the back of her neck, also acquired at the age of 17. She feels somewhat embarrassed by both because of how cliché the kanji has become and that the flash, though slightly altered, was still based on a mass-produced tattoo design rather than designed specifically for her. However, as Lacie further explains, even these first tattoos have special meaning:

L: I don't really regret any of them. I know a lot of tattoo artists that have wiped it off and started over. So, I feel I'm doing pretty well if I still like what I got ten years ago.

In addition to the first two tattoos that Lacie received at 17, she has added a number of new pieces. When she was 18 and 19, Lacie received tribal tattoos on her lower back and right arm which she continued working on into her 20s. Lacie remembers the first tattoo that she thought was truly successful, which is a back piece that she began working on at the time:

L: Well, it wasn't good, but my lower back piece ... I started that when I turned 18 when I was getting ready to move to Lansing and go to college. I was born in the house I grew up in ... we lived there my whole life, my parents still live there. ... so, me leaving and going to college ... I was the big hope ... then I turned into a tattoo artist. [laughing] But, I got the lower back done because it was such a big step and I kind of wanted to make note of that on my body. And, my back piece is actually turned into a map of me leaving and going places. That's really important to me. It's corny 'cuz it's just tribal, but it means more to me than any of the other work. ... It's a reminder; it's monumental in my mind.

Between 20 and 22 Lacie added several more tattoos, including: lettering added to her lower back, her left wrist, a tribal chest piece, tribal work on her left arm, and behind both ears. During this period, Lacie also began her apprenticeship and tattooed her own legs doing tribal pieces on her calves, the sides of her knees, and the second toe on her right foot. At 23 and 24, she added tattoos on her right wrist, to the top of her back piece, and the left calf, which was her first black and grey piece. At 25, Lacie received her left sleeve which is her favorite tattoo. Throughout her 26th year she obtained tattoos on her right leg, continued to work on her upper back piece, and on her left forefinger.

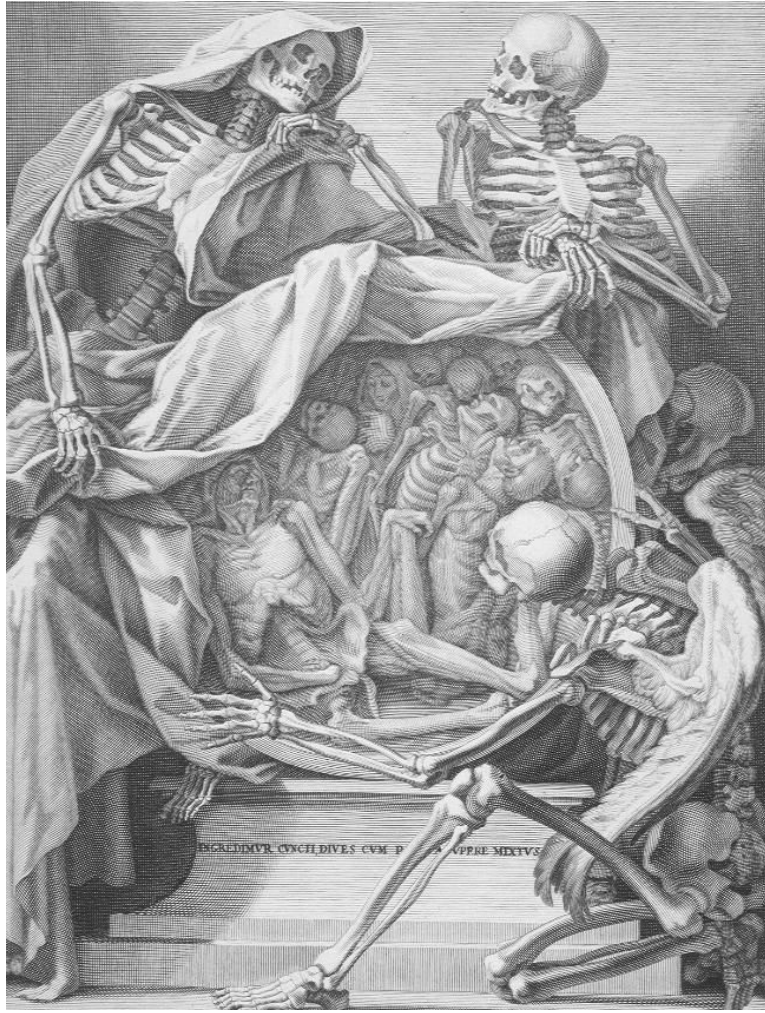
I asked Lacie if any of her tattoos had special meaning attached to them. Her response was that they all have special meaning to her, even if they cannot be readily interpreted by others. The only exception for her is a historic piece on her left arm that can be recognized as being inspired by an engraving by Bernardino Genga (see Figure 10):

L: ... everything is stuff that's just symbolic to me and I know why I've got it. But, nobody else really gets it and they don't have to. It's one of those things that I just did for myself for different periods of my life ...

For Lacie, each piece represents the person she was when she received it and serves as a reminder of past periods. In the future, Lacie hopes to one day end up with most of her body covered by tattoos. In particular, she would like to complete the sleeve on her left arm and have her left hand tattooed with a memorial piece for her grandfather.

Figure 10: Inspiration for Lacie's Left Arm Piece

Anatomia per Uso del Disegno; Genga, Bernardino; 17th Century



(Source: <http://www.mayo.edu>)

Overall, Lacie states that she believes her body modifications have played a significant role in her own sense of identity and self. Recalling her first experience with being tattooed, she explains how it has shaped and developed her identity:

L: ... I remember being in high school and not having anything ... and feeling so awkward. And I know a lot of it was just because I was in high school, but the more tattoos I get the more normal I feel. The more like myself I feel. It's just stuff that's always been under my skin and I have to get tattooed and get it out.

Every so often, she is surprised to see exactly how tattooed she is:

L: ... It's weird in the summertime when all my tattoos are showing. It's like, 'Holy shit I'm covered!' I was in a wedding in Australia and I was wearing a ... spaghetti strap dress ... and this girl took a picture of me from behind and ... I had my head turned and I could see the patches behind my ears, my whole back is ... solid black ... my arms ... you can even see ... my wrists.

For Lacie, such photos are surprising because she does not often get to see everything on her back. The important thing is that she continues to feel more comfortable with herself the more modifications she obtains, something that may be difficult for some people to understand. Lacie further explained that even though some family members do not necessarily understand her high level of interest in tattooing, both of her parents have been supportive and want her to express herself and to be comfortable with who she is. I asked Lacie if her family's response entered into her choice to become tattooed. She responded that she is not too worried any more and that any conflicts with her mother over her tattoos are more symbolic than anything else.

L: It becomes almost a ... symbolic war now. She has to say no, I have to ask. ... We just throw these grenades back and forth. My parents got me my first tattoo, so it's not like they can be that offended. I've tattooed my entire family.

Lacie went on to state that her parents are not disapproving of tattooing as a whole, as they would be hypocritical objecting to her tattoos when they have their own. For them, it is more about the number of tattoos; her parents are not as "into it" as Lacie, and are not covered to the extent that she is.

Lacie believes that her art school training has been important to her work as a tattoo artist because, as she explains, "tattoo art has gotten so much respect as actually being an artistic expression." She traces the origins of her desire to become involved in tattooing as a profession to her first experience of being tattooed. But, it was not until two years later when she was receiving a tattoo on her arm that the topic of an apprenticeship came up. This was her first experience with watching a tattoo actually being done, since all of her previous work had been on her back where she could not see the tattooing taking place. She received this tattoo from the owner of the shop where she ended up apprenticing. She recalls how this affected her future career goals:

L: ... the first time I got to watch one being done [on] myself it was a great inspiration. And, he was really encouraging as well. I had already checked around the other shops and they [said], '...two thousand dollars for an apprenticeship.' You don't get paid; you pay them. [So], I was sitting there one day, talking to Bob while he was working on my art, and I asked, 'How much you charge for an apprenticeship?' He said, 'I don't charge anything to be an apprentice at my shop. But, you better be here and you better learn something.' So, I [said], 'Alright, I'll be here tomorrow, and I'll be here everyday until you hire me.' And, I pretty much stalked him until he threatened legal action [jokingly]. Then he hired me.

She went on to explain that rather than actually “stalking” the owner she called the shop on a regular basis asking about a position. The owner finally responded by saying, “If I hire you will you quit calling here?” That was how her apprenticeship began.

Lacie recalls the apprenticeship period as being very difficult, as her mentors made it particularly brutal for her in order to toughen her up in preparation for working in an industry that can be ruthless:

L: ... It’s such a brutal industry. They just abuse you, and [if] you can take it you can stay. ... I think especially being female ... they just give you hell to make sure you can last ...

This preparation was important for Lacie, because it ensured that she was able to handle any adversity she might face in working in the industry. Although her apprenticeship prepared her for the potential challenge of working in a male-dominated industry, it also allowed her to distinguish herself from her male counterparts. According to Lacie, gender played an important role in her training and has in fact helped her throughout her career as a tattoo artist:

L: ... it really is a sexist ... industry and, it’s not really [a] bad thing. Because if you’re a girl and you make it through ... the apprenticeship and you learn everything there is to know about [tattooing] then you’re gonna be well-respected among your colleagues ... to some degree anyway.

According to Lacie, the sexist nature of the industry is sometimes less of a hurdle than one might think. She pointed to the importance for any artist, whether male or female, to gain respect in the industry, and once this is achieved all artists, men and women alike, receive the credit they are due. Lacie said that women can distinguish

themselves by being excellent artists and that being a woman might actually help clear the path to recognition:

L: ... I think if you're a female artist, especially if you prove yourself to be a really good artist, you do get a lot more respect ... from other male artists.

For Lacie, Sara Peacock, a well known female tattoo artist is an important role model, due particularly to her talent and style:

L: She's really talented and I've heard really good things about her. It's encouraging to see a big name in the industry that's a female ... and is putting out fantastic, incredible work. And, as far as that goes there's a load of guys in the industry, so it's got to be hard for [male tattooists] to make a name for themselves. There aren't a lot of us [females], so you do get a little more recognition if you get your boot straps up and get in there. You do get a lot of credit for what you accomplish [in the tattoo industry].

When I asked about her first experience with tattooing someone else, Lacie recalled that after learning tattooing on herself, she did a tattoo on her brother, "because he wouldn't sue, ... he sacrificed his right arm to me (laughs)." Lacie recently touched-up the tattoo. It was a tribal design, so some areas had "gone grey" and needed to be darkened, and some of the points needed sharpening. Lacie also recalls tattooing other apprentices in her shop:

L: I ... tattooed one of the shop apprentices around the same time ... just hamburgered the poor kid's leg. I was trying to make it black black and it just turned into nasty scab black. I hurt that poor little bugger. But, he was an apprentice and I didn't know what I was doing. Free tattoos, you get what you pay for.

This is the point when Lacie recalls learning the importance of the phrase, “It’s better to touch it up than to tear it up.”

Lacie learned the basics of the tattoo industry at the first shop she worked in, which was in Michigan. However, since it was a small shop, she did not have a lot of opportunity to learn from artists other than the two regular employees. Lacie ultimately worked for about two years in Lansing before moving to Raleigh, North Carolina, where she began working at a street shop. She recalls how her skills evolved with each new opportunity:

L: ... the three years I worked [at the street shop in Raleigh] ... I learned more than I learned in [Michigan] ... Just because of the volume of customers I was doing. ... Just from working in a shop that gave me the opportunity to do a tattoo every 20 minutes. When you’re doing a name every hour, you’re gonna get better at line work. Your lettering is gonna get better.

Lacie also discussed how working in Raleigh allowed her to observe more artists’ work. She was thus able to learn different techniques and approaches to tattooing, which in turn helped increase her skill and confidence level:

L: ... to get good at all, being able to watch seven or eight people work and take in whatever works for [me] from their styles help[ed] out a lot. ... After being there for a year I was a lot better than when I started. Now, I’m a lot more confident with my work.

She remembers her first back piece as being important to her growth as a professional artist. However, reflecting on the piece, there are things that she would have liked to improve upon:

L: My first back piece was pretty big. I still wish to this day I could have redrawn it before I put it on [the customer]. ... He [the boss] said, 'you're doing this and you're doing this today.' So, [you] pass up your first back piece or jump in. And, it actually came out quite well, and I'm still happy with it. I just wish I could've redrawn it.

She further explains that the inability to redraw the tattoo had a lot to do with the nature of the shop she was working in. That is, Lacie would finish a tattoo and the completed line drawing for the next one would already be waiting for her at the front counter. In this type of "mass production" shop, she often did not meet the customers she worked on until they went into her work room to receive the tattoo. However, even in this type of location, Lacie explained, she would often "sneak back" to her room to redraw any line work she was unhappy with.

Lacie's skills continued to develop as she became more experienced as an artist. She is proud of her first piece of portrait tattooing, "the only portrait I've ever done was on this kid last summer. [It] was really stressful too, but it was a really good feeling when I finished." Lacie is aware of the significance of the tattoo, but also of the emotion that often surrounds the experience. She gives an example of a customer who had his best friend pass away when saving his little brother from drowning. This customer was seeking a memorial piece. Because the piece held such personal significance for the customer, Lacie knew that it had to be perfect and approached the work with the desire to honor the memory of the customer's friend. The customer was very happy with the result, which for Lacie was a relief, knowing that she had successfully captured the essence of the person in the portrait (see Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11: Original Photo for Portrait Tattoo

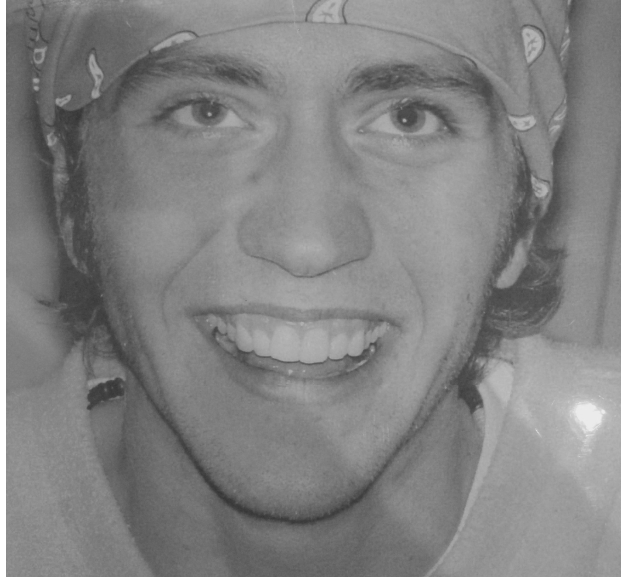


Figure 12: Completed Black and Grey Portrait Tattoo by Lacie



To keep up with the latest innovations in her field, Lacie attends conventions including the 2006 North Carolina Annual Tattoo Convention. In addition, Lacie had a black and grey lotus flower design with a white outline published in *Skin & Art*, a top magazine (see Figure 13). I asked Lacie how she describes her work to individuals who may not be familiar with the role of a tattoo artist. Lacie's "romantic" answer is, "chang(ing) people's lives one needle at a time." However, she went on to say that the cultural roots of tattooing are her true motivation:

L: ... I would definitely start with the cultural ties to [tattooing] because that's what allured me to tattoos. I'm part Native American and to me the native lifestyle and especially the native traditions ... Any natives too, the Maoris, South Pacific Islanders ... that practice tattooing as a part of their culture and as a part of ritual is a big influence on me. That's why a lot of my work is tribal, because it seems more symbolic, I guess. ... I would try to describe that aspect first and foremost. Then, I would also tell them it's a way to decorate ...

According to Lacie, tattooing, in a more contemporary sense, allows individuals to modify their body in a decorative way, stay in style, and at the same time participate in a consumption activity that "pays Lacie's rent."

Lacie continues to actively improve upon the work she produces, particularly by watching other artists work and seeking their advice. She feels she benefits greatly from the criticism of others, such as the time shortly after she arrived in North Carolina and did a scorpion piece:

L: When I was [at the street shop] the first year, the first month I was there. ... Like I said, I wasn't very good. I did this piece and I thought it looked alright, and I [said], 'Guys, check out this scorpion I did!' And they looked at it and [said], 'That looks like shit!' And I [said], 'Aw, why? What looks bad on it.'

Figure 13: Black and Grey Lotus Tattoo by Lacie



Lacie's co-workers explained to her what looked bad and what areas could be further worked on:

L: And I [said], 'Oh, okay. Well, I'll consider that when I do the next one. Thanks for telling me it looks like shit. And, thanks for telling me why more importantly.' They were definitely good at handing out the criticisms.

Lacie is also considering enrolling in art courses in order provide a more formal setting for developing her skills as an artist:

L: I have thought about [taking] an art class. It's hard to do because it's right in the middle of the day when I'm working. But, for me, just having the discipline of having to go somewhere to draw makes you a better artist.

Lacie sees a strong link to tattooing as it used today and artistic expression:

L: ... it's not just some dirty old scratcher putting your wife's name on ya and crossing out your girlfriend's name. ... Now it's beautiful masterpieces that people get to walk around with. ... So, learning more conventional artistic techniques is just going to help [me] be a better artist anyway. But, there's so much difference in tattooing ... and drawing that you've got to learn how to apply [artwork] to a tattoo.

When asked about the types of inspiration she seeks for her creative process, she explains that a lot of her inspiration comes from other artists' work as well as conventional art forms and realistic looking designs:

L: Like, pin-up stuff. I love that because if you look at it, you are, you think, 'Oh my God, that's amazing! That's so pretty! That's so hot! That's so awesome!' And, I really like realistic styles ... stuff that you look and [say], 'I can't believe that's in skin! Or even on paper for that matter.'

Lacie mentioned that she also finds inspiration in designs that are more imaginative. She recalled one recent customer who gave her a surprise with a new twist on a popular tattoo design:

L: ... I had a girl come in, she wanted a butterfly. And I [thought], ‘Man, not a butterfly.’ And, then she showed me [the design] and it was a stick of butter with fly wings on it and, it was the best tattoo I did all day [see Figure 14]. It was so much fun to work on. I like horror [images] too. Because it’s just more fun to draw.

Although Lacie enjoys working on pieces that may be fun to draw, she admits that her sketching technique is not exactly “textbook.” When asked whether she went through specific steps to create a piece, she responds, “Well, I don’t draw correctly, so no.” This is part of the reason she is considering taking an art course, to work on her drawing technique:

L: ... If I drew correctly I would map things out lightly and then place [them], and then fix things, and then solidify it. But, I just go in and make a final outline and then mess with it. I need to practice more I think.

Lacie does, however, have certain steps that she goes through in order to work out a tattoo design from concept to completion:

L: ... when I sit down and try to create something, I usually try to use a visible reference of some kind ... I’ll research a little bit, and then I’ll just try to Frankenstein something up that looks right. You know, depending on what it is. I can do tribal without any reference ... lettering ... some horror. A lot of times I’d like to have a reference to double-check myself in terms of proportions and perspective.

Figure 14: *Butter-fly* Tattoo by Lacie



Success, Lacie explained, is the best reward for her creative efforts. That is, when “everything comes together ... and you get to do something really cool.” This often has a lot to do with the response of the customer to the design that has been created. According to Lacie, “if you have someone who’s fun to work on and is relaxed” the piece will usually come out better. She points out that it is important for the client to trust her talent, but that their expectations about the finished product must also be realistic. She wants customers to realize that she, like all artists, are human and therefore, “every line won’t be straight as a ruler. But, a good artist can get damn close.”

The response of the customer, for Lacie, can be crucial to the pleasure or frustration evoked by particular pieces. She finds it particularly trying if she works with a customer who wants to do an interesting piece, but who does not like the preliminary sketches or who wants to change the design. Oftentimes, this can affect the flow of the tattoo, or make it look awkward in relation to the body. Lacie goes on to explain, “You have to give the customer what they want, even if you don’t necessarily like it. But a piece *always* looks better when an artist is allowed the freedom to create.”

I asked Lacie if she believes there is a difference between her technique and style. She replied that they are different, yet related principles. For Lacie, good technique could be a part of any style, but very specific style could hamper the development of strong technique:

L: ... Technique, if it’s well rounded and studied and practiced, your technique can fit into any style. ... You can do anything if you have good technique. I think sometimes if ... everything looks the same ... to me, that seems kind of boring. I think that if you have a good technique you can be really versatile.

She further explains that doing every tattoo in the same style is redundant, and that ideally, she would like to be known as being “versatile in style and a perfectionist with her technique.” However, she also recognizes that there is always room for improvement. Even the best tattoo artists, she explains, has room for improvement:

L: It’s one of those things where you can finish a tattoo and [think], ‘Man, it looks good.’ But there’s just one part right there where I just didn’t do that right, and it’s gonna bug me forever. ... You have to let it go. But, if your technique is good you should be able to get through the tattoo with everything looking good, even if you messed up. Because everybody ... we’re human ... every single tattoo has a mistake in it.

Although she would like to be known as having a versatile style, there are particular areas in which she has made a name for herself, or that she excels in:

L: I’d like to be able to do everything, but I do concentrate on the realistic stuff and black and grey. ... At the moment a lot of people seek me out for solid black and tribal work because I [have] a good reputation for it in town, and I’ve done a lot of it.

In the future, Lacie hopes to expand the number of styles that she is known for. For example, she would like to be known, “as the girl you want to go see to get some killer gore work done.” Lacie would also like to do more portraits and pin-ups and finds “horror movie stills and realistic wildlife exciting” as well.

For Lacie, changing or adding styles can often be difficult because her goals as an individual artist must be balanced by the demands of her clientele: “a lot of people don’t get those [horror or pin-up] tattoos. A lot of people come in and [want] tribal or

lettering.” She finds that many customers can be frustrating when they are more concerned about the price of the tattoo than the artwork to be completed.

During the fieldwork, I acquired a pin-up style tattoo from Lacie (see Figure 15). To start, I brought some pictures of pin-ups that I liked and discussed the particular type of pin-up I was looking for. Then, together, Lacie and I looked at additional pin-up pictures to get an idea of the best position for the design location. Lacie then sketched the preliminary design, which we used to discuss the overall size, look, and color scheme of the tattoo. Once this was agreed on, a final sketch was made to then develop the stencil for the tattoo. The stencil was then placed on my arm. The tattoo was completed over two sessions, lasting approximately three and a half hours each. In the first session, the outline work and skin tones were completed. After a minimum of two weeks to allow for healing, the second session consisted of filling in the hair and dress and completing any touch-ups from the first session.

In the middle of 2006, Lacie moved from her first Raleigh location to Phoenix Tattoo and Gallery. Phoenix Tattoo, previously called Tattoo Devil Studios, has been in business for about two years. I asked Lacie if she feels there is a difference between working in a high-volume street shop and The Phoenix, where the focus is on high-quality, custom work. She compares street shops to big box retailers, with a focus on getting “as many tattoos done as you can and make the most money off of it:”

L: ... well, with a street shop you just bam out one after another, it's like Wal-Mart. ... Custom shops rely mainly on their ... devout customer bases ... and [clients] come in for a particular artist I think most [of] my customers have come [to the Phoenix], and I'm excited about that.

Figure 15: My Medusa Pin-up Tattoo by Lacie



Lacie works approximately 50 hours a week, generally from noon to 10 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday, as Phoenix is closed on Sundays and Mondays. Despite long hours, Lacie is positive about her time spent working at Phoenix:

L: I love it. ... I'm so lucky that I come to a job I love fifty hours a week. Even when it's bad, it's good. Even when you don't want to get out of bed and go to work, you kinda want to go to work.

She feels fortunate because, as Lacie says, "I get to sit on my ass all day and draw. It's great":

L: Most of the customers we get are really cool. Most of the customers are people you want to sit down with for three or four hours at a time. I've got some really good friends I've made because I'm [their] artist.

She explains that it can be "a bit stressful changing a person's appearance for the rest of their life," but that it is almost always a positive experience. Moreover, if there are any customers that she feels particularly uncomfortable with, Lacie has the option to choose not to work with them.

For Lacie, the time spent at Phoenix is enjoyable in part because of the environment created by the individuals who work there (see Figure 16, Lacie's workspace). When I asked her to describe the work environment, she replied that though she is technically the shop manager, the shop functions pretty well on its own because each of the employees work well together:

Figure 16: Lacie's Workspace



L: ... Well, I'm supposed to be the boss now. I don't really know how that works. I'm also the newest kid here. ... it really means I just do supplies. You know, I call the [owner] when the lights go out, that's about it. But, it's cool because I feel like we're all kind of even and receptive to each other. And we all kind of help each other out. It's actually the best environment I've ever worked in.

I asked Lacie to explain her most and least favorite aspects of the work environment. Her favorite aspects of working at Phoenix are the structure and feel of the shop, as created by the individuals working in it:

L: My favorite part is, you know, the witty banter all day long. We get on each other all the time [and] it is so relaxed. You want to go, take off. You want to stay late, cool. ... It's just really chill. We have a lot of the same taste in music which helps too, because there's only one CD player ...

When talking about her least favorite aspects of the work environment, Lacie is less specific. The few gripes she has are not specific to working at Phoenix, or even working as a tattoo artist, but are instead related to situations in which she is required to interact with others. As with any relationship, she explains, things can be difficult.

L: ... like everywhere else there's assholes. It comes with working anywhere though. So, it's not even work necessarily, it's tolerance with people fifty hours a week.

Lacie finds that some people can be frustrating. Individuals who come in, but are not serious about getting a tattoo can waste her time. Also, she explains it can be frustrating when people have a preliminary sketch done but never return for the tattoo. Although Phoenix does require a small deposit (applied towards the total cost of the tattoo), the deposit rarely covers the cost of the artist's time spent on the sketch.

When customers come into Phoenix seeking advice on a tattoo Lacie will try to work with them to create the best possible outcome. However, as she explains, after six years of giving customers advice she rarely gives them her opinion. Due in part to her experiences in street shops, she wants “people to get a good tattoo because (her) name is attached to it. But, you can’t talk some people out of a bad idea.” Additionally, Lacie has found that it is difficult to give customers advice on the work they choose:

L: Sometimes it’s so disheartening. Sometimes [you think], ‘No, you’re not going to get that. ... That’s so corny. It’s so over done. It’s so boring.’ So many times you just want to grab somebody and shake them.

She further states that ultimately it is the customer’s body and therefore his or her choice, and that, “I’ll do what I can to dissuade a client from a bad choice, but I’m nobody’s mother.” However, Lacie makes sure that she provides customers with the best advice possible. For instance, if the customer wants a tattoo that is a poor choice, she may try to talk him or her out of the decision. She believes that certain bodily locations are more frowned upon by society than others:

L: ... if someone wants a tattoo on their neck, and they don’t have any other tattoo, and they don’t have a permanent job for the rest of their lives or a really big savings [laughs]. I try to talk them out of it. I try to talk people out of hands, face, anything like that.

During the observation period, a customer came in seeking a red dot tattoo on his middle finger. Lacie worked with him and warned it would fade and was not guaranteed. She suggested a size that would last as well as possibly adding a light outline to the red. He was not to be dissuaded however, and acquired a red dot, approximately the size of a

freckle on his finger. In order to help the client out, and even though it is an exception, Lacie offered him a free touch-up when it faded.

One common mistake that customers make is to get name tattoos. She generally gives the following advice:

L: ... if it's not a relative, a pet, or somebody [who died], don't put it on ya 'cuz they'll probably piss you off as soon as you put it on ya. And it's a big jinx, so I try to talk people out of [it].

Again, Lacie stresses that even after giving customers advice, and particularly when she worked in the street shop, she would often end up giving the client the tattoo they wanted. Lacie recalls one particular experience in which she felt that warning the customer was not necessary, as in this case, he was unlikely to listen:

L: I had a guy come in and he had a girl's name as big as life on his arm ... it was huge! And, he wanted to get another name of his new girlfriend on his neck!

In Lacie's experience, these customers usually come back within three months seeking to cover up the name tattoo. As a result, Lacie tries to get customers who want names to get them in color rather than black ink because color is easier to cover up.

I asked Lacie if she found that males or females were more receptive to suggestions. She is not sure if any differences exist, however, the customer's willingness to listen to her opinion will oftentimes depend on gender:

L: ... girls are automatically defensive with other girls, although they're also more rational than guys are. When telling a girl that they might regret a tattoo they're more likely to think [about it longer], guys are receptive too, because they're willing to take the opinion.

The differences Lacie feels do exist can be seen throughout the entire tattoo process from selecting to receiving, and living with, the tattoo:

L: I think that guys are more prone to be less concerned and more relaxed with it. Less concerned with how it will impact their lives, and whether or not they want it on their wedding day. I think that women withstand the pain better ... but, they get more worked up than guys do.

She further explains that how customers react to tattoos often has to do with whether they are at the shop alone or in a group. Lacie says that women will tend to be more melodramatic about the whole process when they are in a group.

In the process of tattooing the customer, Lacie sees her role as active rather than simply the person applying the tattoo. She believes that making the client comfortable, especially if it is the first tattoo, is an important part of the process. Lacie herself recalls being yelled at by the tattooist who did her first tattoo, and how the experience has affected her own approach to being a tattoo artist:

L: My first tattoo was done by a total dick. This guy was such an asshole I can't believe I ever got tattooed again. I got it on my stomach and he said, 'In ten years you're gonna get all pregnant and fat and that's gonna look like shit.' I said, 'I'm 17 and I'm never gonna look this good again. You put it where I told you.'

She says that customers often ask her what she will do with her tattoos when she is older, to which she responds, "If you're 80 and your biggest concern is how your tattoo looks, you're doing pretty good."

As a tattoo artist, Lacie stresses the importance of providing an enjoyable experience for all of her customers, and carries this through the entire tattoo experience for the customer:

L: ... if you make an experience good for someone, they'll remember that forever. Even the communicat[ion] before they get tattooed, just talking to them about their ideas before they get anything done. They're gonna remember you fondly.

She finds that selecting the tattoo is an important initial part of the process for customers.

Lacie recalls one of her more recent clients who came to her after having difficult experiences at a number of other local shops:

L: I had one kid come in that [had] been all over town ... he wanted to get some sparrows on his chest. And the sparrows he wanted to do sounded pretty cool and I was really into that. Generally, if it's anything that isn't a cross or a butterfly or a name, I get really into it. ... I like showing people I'm as excited as they are to get it done. And, he was just so happy that someone was talking to him civilly and not treating him like a complete dick just because he didn't know everything about tattoos.

Lacie believes that focusing on a customer's comfort level and experience not only makes good business sense, but it also improves the tattooing process for the artist:

L: If you're good to your customers, they're good to you. People who might not tip usually, would if you go the extra mile. And, I try to make them comfortable. If they're comfortable they're not going to pass out, they're not going to freak out; they're going to relax. They're gonna try to be tough for ya. But, if you're making them feel awkward or if you're putting them out, they're not going to have any fun with it, which means it's gonna be harder to do. I just try to make it a good experience for people, because I always feel like it's a good experience for me.

Similar to gender differences between men and women during the process of tattoo selection, Lacie believes that there are some differences with regard to her role during the tattoo process. That is, the level of interaction that she maintains with male clients is different than with female clients:

L: ... I think with guys you can give them a little more shit and it's funnier. Because you're a girl giving the shit and you're in control of the situation the whole time. You're running the show. You have to [be] assertive and in charge. And, the guys that want to give you shit you can put them ... in their place right away. And, that's kind of cool 'cuz, how often do you get to do that? You know, cuz I've got sexist customers and ... guys that want to talk smack ...

Lacie points out that when she threatens to hide a penis in their tattoo, they generally behave. She stresses that this is a joke, and she wouldn't intentionally give a customer a bad tattoo. This ability to joke around a bit is often important to making a customer feel more comfortable, "like I said, you're controlling the situation, so it's different you have to kind of feel people out a little bit to see how they are." She goes on to explain that the male-dominated nature of the industry can sometimes lead to confusion when she helps customers choose their tattoos:

L: I think for guys, sometimes they won't give me the credit because I'm a girl. They'll [ask], 'Where's the guy who's gonna do my tattoo?' And I'll [say], 'You're looking at him!' You know, 'What'do mean the guy who's gonna do your tattoo? Why'd you think I've been talking to you for the last half hour?' ... a lot of times they don't even expect you're an artist.

However, Lacie points out that she tends to get more frustrated with women customers. In particular, she finds that when women come in groups to get tattoos they become exponentially more difficult:

L: ... with the girls I kind of get fed up I think. When [there is] eight of them that come to watch their sorority sister get her letters on their hip or her star on her [ankle] ... Whenever it's a girl with a whole bunch of her girlfriends with her. They're never good in the chair. There's always a problem because they're putting on a show. They [say], 'Oh it hurts. Oh, my God. Oh it's terrible.' It's always this big ordeal.

In contrast, Lacie believes that the tattooing process can actually go better when men come in as a group, "with guys, the more people [around], the tougher they have to be. So, actually, it can be better if there are more of them around."

She finds that friends can be helpful when trying to ease the pain of tattooing, but that sometimes they can be too helpful; if they cause the customer to laugh a lot, and thus to move, the process is much more difficult. Customers who come in on their own are also different. Lacie finds that women tend to do much better on their own. However, she struggles when male-female couples come in to be tattooed together:

L: ... I hate it when couples want to kiss on each other when the other (one) gets a tattoo. It's like, 'You guys are gonna have to split up for a minute, ok?' Because it's so annoying.

Lacie is aware of how a customer's comfort level may be affected by how he or she interacts with a female artist. Lacie finds that clients of both genders respond differently, whether feeling threatened or comforted by the fact that she is female:

L: ... With the girls a lot of times they're really comfortable immediately, but it's usually one of the two. And, it can be the same way with guys. Some guys are comfortable having a girl tattoo them. Something about a guy touching their body parts, I don't know, they get a little homophobic. We [female artists] do get sucked into a lot of hairy butt tattoos because the guys pass them on to us ... I find a lot of times too, guys get tattoos that I'm more interested in doing. ... I like

doing flowers and stuff like that, but a lot of times girls want to stick with something small. And the guys are more apt to go big and get something kind of crazy and scary looking and it's more probable that they'll get something black and grey too. And that's what I like to do...

Overall, Lacie feels that she communicates more successfully with her male customers than females. When I asked her why she finds this to be the case, Lacie responds that though she had never really thought about it, she guessed it was closely related to her past:

L: I'm actually better with my male customers. I think it's because I've always gotten along better with guys anyways. With the motorcycle stuff and hanging out with my dad. I'm a daddy's girl, so being around a big group of guys is actually a lot more comfortable than being around a bunch of cackling women.

In her free time, Lacie enjoys motorcycles, traveling, shopping, and spending time with family and friends. She refers to her motorcycles as members of the family that have been with her throughout important life passages:

L: I love my motorcycle. ... I like working on the [wreck] that's in 70,000 pieces in my garage, and I like riding the one that's not. ... I rode down here [from Michigan] on a motorcycle [a 1981 Honda CB650]. It finally gave out on me ... the poor girl ... my Betty. ... So, for the first time in my life I went down to the Honda dealership and bought one off the floor.

Lacie sees this as an important purchase in her life saying, "It felt great because I *never* had *anything* and I bought it and paid for it myself." Lacie mentioned a few other activities that she does in her spare time, such as watching movies with her boyfriend and being outdoors. However, tattooing and motorcycles certainly are at the forefront of her life:

L: ... I like shopping. That's cool, like going to the Flea Market that's cool. I like movies ... I don't know ... Outside of tattooing there's not too much I like. Outside of this place I like sitting on the couch. I like cooking too. But, I do wish I could ride more, that's the biggest thing for me.

Directly related to Lacie's love of motorcycles is also the importance of her family, friends, and being able to travel. Every year she tries to go on at least one big motorcycle run, and "try to catch up with ... Pops." Lacie's father contributes to her interest in motorcycles, so it is important for her to share the experience with him.

Lacie feels that her decision to work at Phoenix Tattoo has been particularly helpful in meeting her need to spend time doing the things that are important to her. As she explains, the owners recognize the need for breaks and time off, something that was not necessarily the case in the shops she worked at previously.

L: ... My family is the [most important] thing to me, and I have to go home to Michigan every summer; I have to go every winter. ... So, it's really cool that they know [I] spend fifty hours a week here.

When Lacie asks for time off to visit her family or to travel, the owners do not have a problem with it. Lacie is appreciative of this, recalling how she asked for a lot of time off in her first year at Phoenix.

L: I was in Michigan for a month [before] I started here. Then in September, [left] for forty days to go to Australia. When I [came] back I [went] home for Christmas too.

Travel is definitely an important part of Lacie's life, and is reflected in her passion for both tattooing and motorcycles. She explained:

L: ... motorcycles represent freedom to me. The need to just go somewhere for a while and experience something new. It means everything to me; that's why I made it my backpiece.

Given the relatively long hours she spends at work, Lacie, like most other professionals, values her time away from the workplace. However, when she travels beyond Raleigh she often finds that she ends up mixing her free time with tattooing, and that this can have its ups and downs, in that, while it cuts into her free time, she can “travel to the other side of the world and call it a work holiday”:

L: ... when I was in Australia I spent easily 200 hours tattooing. Same thing when I go home for Christmas ... and summer. I've got to have my equipment with me. People are waiting. Everybody wants to get work done. It's kind of rough because it ends up cutting into your free time. But, it's also cool because you can do it anywhere ...

Spending time around town can often be trying for her, especially when prospective customers seem to forget that she is not at work:

L: It does drive me nuts if I'm [working] till the end of the night, and I'm at the bar after work. Say, having a drink and someone wants to come up to me and say, 'Dude, I want to get this tattoo done, and I want it to look like this. And, I'm gonna come and see ya.' And I want to say, 'Then come in and see me when I'm at work. Cuz I'm not at work right now, and I'm not really gonna remember what you told me. And, at the moment I don't really care. But, if you come in when I'm working I'll be happy to help you out.'

In such situations, Lacie tries to be nice and gives them a business card so they can come in during shop hours.

According to Lacie, dealing with people outside of work or family can also become frustrating. In particular, she finds that strangers will often feel that it is acceptable to interrupt her to ask about her modifications, regardless of whether it is appropriate:

L: ... It gets kind of tiring to be the ambassador of good will on tattoos ... You know, you're at dinner and you're trying to have a good meal and some jackass comes up to you, 'Did that hurt? How much did that cost?' And you want to say, 'I didn't come up ... and ask you how much your 6th grade education cost, did I?' [jokingly] You want to say that so bad, but you don't get to say that to these people. You have to say, 'Yeah, I got them done at Phoenix, they do good work. Thank you.' You know, you gotta be as polite as possible and it gets kinda frustrating because it's always the same dumb questions.

However, Lacie is also quick to add that interactions, or lack thereof, brought about by reactions to her modifications can also be beneficial. She explains that negative reactions are particularly useful:

L: ... as far as people going, 'Tattoos, that's disgusting!' I will never waste my time talking to [that person] because they won't bother [to get to know] me. So, I've just weeded out [an] asshole. It helps you weed out [people] that judge [others] by the way they look. You don't want to talk to those people anyway. So, they automatically [assume] something about you and avoid you.

I asked Lacie if she feels that negative perceptions of her modifications and occupation were at all related to her gender. Lacie believes a lot of the positive response she gets is because she is female:

L: ... I think ... that a lot of positive response about my tattoos is because I'm a girl. 'Oh a girl with tattoos, woohoo, you're a badass.' ... as far as being a tattooed female I think ... it gives me street cred. [laughs]

In contrast to today, Lacie refers to the place of women historically within the development of tattooing in contemporary culture:

L: Tattooed guys ... that was anybody with a sailor hat on, bikers, or convicts. Women who were heavily tattooed were mainly performers or sideshow freaks. They weren't tattooed to be trendy. Some women were just 'practice skin' for their tattoo artist husbands.

For Lacie, the research process was surprisingly easy, and she often forgot I was even there, perhaps because my typical observation location was behind the main desk, somewhat obscured by a potted plant. For her, it is, "kind of funny ... when you realize that somebody's listening to the crap you just said ... lot's of edits on Lacie." Despite forgetting about my presence, Lacie found the research experience to be valuable. It provided a framework for evaluating her own work and the effect it has on customers:

L: I think it's kind of reminded me ... how much more seriously I should take what I do. I mean I take it seriously, but as far as taking my work home with me a little more often and working on possibly [an] art class [or paintings].

Lacie felt that the questions were helpful in providing insight to areas of her work that she would not have necessarily thought about in the normal course of her day.

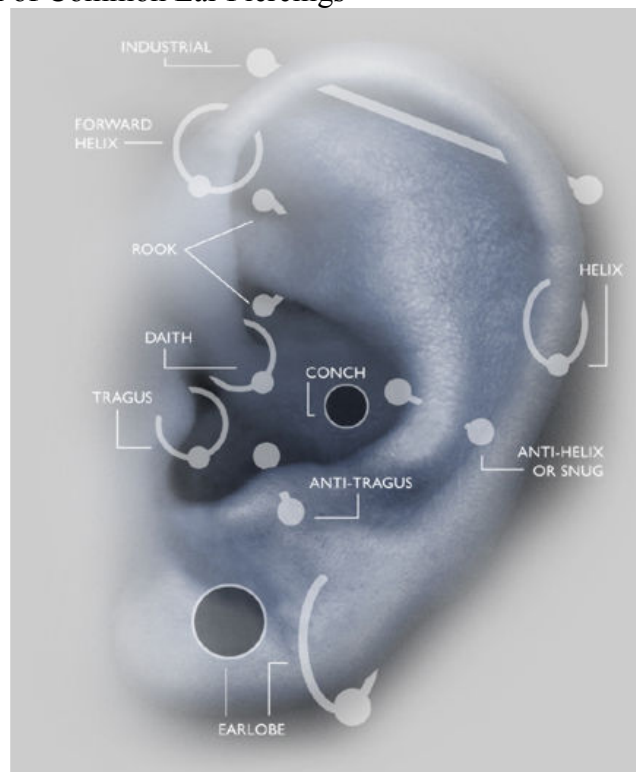
Lacie sees her future in the industry as long-term, and hopes to "do this forever." She plans to continue improving her technical skills and broadening her stylistic range. In terms of her role in the tattooing community, the research process provided Lacie an opportunity to consider what it means to be involved in the industry. As she explains:

L: ... it actually made me consider a little more what it means to be a girl in the tattooing community. I never really think about it ... I've actually noticed more things that are because I'm female. ... I didn't really think ... about it at first because it's such a male-dominated industry. ... I took a lot of shit the first three years I was doing this, and a lot from the guys I was learning from. God bless 'em, I love 'em to pieces. They're the greatest guys in the world ... they were so ruthless on me. But, it was because [of them] now I am tough as hell ... and I know they did that on purpose. 'Cuz they know how hard it is to be a tattoo artist, let alone trying to be a female [tattoo artist].

Terms Used⁵

Piercing Terminology

Figure 17: Diagram of Common Ear Piercings



(<http://silverlinetattoo.com>)

⁵ All definitions were obtained from <http://www.bmezine.com>.

Table 2: Gauge Conversions of Common Piercing Sizes

METRIC	GAUGES
1.0 mm	18 Gauge
1.2 mm	16 Gauge
1.6 mm	14 Gauge
2.0 mm	12 Gauge
2.5 mm	10 Gauge
3.2 mm	8 Gauge
4.0 mm	6 Gauge
5.0 mm	4 Gauge
6.0 mm	2 Gauge
8.0 mm	0 Gauge

Beauty Mark: labret placed in the upper lip, off-center, in the same place that a number of starlets have beauty marks (moles). Also known as a Marilyn Monroe or Madonna.

(see labret).

Conch: The inner conch is a piercing through the innermost shell of the ear, next to the ear canal itself. Piercings through the outer shell are called Outer Conch Piercings. While this piercing is often done as a standard piercing, a great many people choose to Dermal Punch this piercing immediately to a larger gauge. It should be noted that making significant changes to the structure of the conch can cause minor loss of hearing.

Daith: This ear piercing passes through the ear's innermost cartilage fold. In most areas this piercing is pronounced "day-th" although the proper pronunciation is "doth" (rhymes with "moth").

Dermal Anchoring: This procedure is still very much in its infancy, and several practitioners have begun experimenting with different jewelry designs and insertion techniques. The current popular method of performing a dermal anchoring is very similar to the punch and taper technique for surface piercing. A single hole is made with a small dermal punch, and a taper is used to elevate some of the skin around it to allow for jewelry insertion. (see Transdermal implant)

Dermal Punch: A dermal punch is a round needle. The medical industry uses these to take biopsy samples, but piercers use them to make round piercings which remove an actual piece of flesh. Dermal punches are primarily used to perform cartilage piercings, punch and taper surface piercings, and nostril piercings. They are not widely used for other types of piercings because they remove a section of tissue, and this may limit stretching of the piercing in the future.

Helix: any piercing through the rim of the cartilage (thus making it susceptible to complications such as Ear Collapse if care is not taken to use proper tools and procedures; for example, piercing guns have been shown to be capable of causing cartilage to shatter. The innermost part of the helix (closest to the head) is sometimes called an Ear Head Piercing.

Industrial: An industrial piercing is two or more piercings connected by a single barbell. While most industrials are a straight bar connecting two helix piercings, they are also

often done vertically or through piercings other than the helix, such as rook to helix piercing or inner or outer conch piercings.

Labret: The Labret is a piercing through the lower lip.

Snug or snuggy: This cartilage piercing passes through the vertical ridge that "outlines" but does not edge the ear. Technically speaking, this is an "anti-helix piercing," although snug seems to be the term in most common circulation.

Stretching: The practice of increasing the diameter of an earlobe piercing after the initial healing period for the purpose of wearing larger gauge jewelry. Standard earlobe piercings, performed with commercial ear piercing instruments (piercing guns), are typically 20 gauge for piercings receiving 14 kt. gold piercing studs, or 18 gauge for piercings receiving 24 kt. gold plated surgical steel piercing studs. If the piercing is performed in a professional piercing studio, the initial size will typically be 16 gauge or larger.

Surface Piercing: piercing where the entrance and exit holes are (usually) pierced through the same flat area of skin.

Tragus: Piercings through the tragus, the little nub in front of the ear canal, are a common form of ear piercing. This piercing is not known to have a historical basis.

Transdermal Implant: A transdermal (percutaneous) implant falls somewhere between a single-hole pocketing and an implant. The simplest way to describe it is as a labret stud with the flat part under the skin, or "a piercing without an exit." The visual effect is that of jewelry (a bead, spike, etc.) that appears to be screwed right into the body. (see dermal anchoring)

Tattoo Terminology

American Traditional or Old School: characterized by bold outlines, heavy black shading, limited primary colors and "standard" designs like black panthers, hearts, daggers, pin-up girls, skulls, and roses.

Flash: sheets of designs that hang on the walls of most studios. Clients who do not know what they want -- and/or do not know that custom tattoos are possible -- can quickly choose a tattoo from these sheets.

Japanese Traditional: Japan's intricate tattoo tradition is the most documented in western society, and has been a consistent inspiration to western tattoo artists. Motifs can often include heavy nature imagery, both real and mythological, such as cherry blossoms, lotuses, dragons, and koi fish. Japanese traditional work can also include body suits, a single thematic tattoo that covers the wearer's arms, legs, back, and chest.

Kanji: Kanji are Chinese logographic characters used in the writing systems of several Asian languages. The word "kanji" specifically refers to a Japanese subset of the language. However, this distinction is often ignored in tattoo motifs, and the term Kanji is used to describe any tattoos of words in a variety of Asian logographic languages.

Scratcher: a tattoo artist that does extremely poor, jailhouse quality tattoos—often out of their homes.

Tribal: Tribal-style tattoo work is characterized by bold silhouette-style graphics and abstract designs, most often done in solid black. In larger work, tribal-style tattooing is characterized by compositions that flow across the body with the goal of emphasizing the body's natural lines and musculature.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the first level of interpretation in the form of individual narratives of the four modifiers. Each narrative was developed through discussion of the core factors of experience within the modifier's life and was based on the texts or data gathered during the fieldwork. In the next chapter, a second level of interpretation will be presented based on these narratives. Presented as a thematic interpretation of the modifier's experiences, commonalities and differences among the four women's experiences will be examined.

CHAPTER V

THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

Each modifier participating in this study has her own individual experiences with the medium of body modification, experiences which affect her understanding of her social roles, creative process, and place within the larger modification industry. There are, however, similar experiences shared among the four participants which provide insight into the place of female body modifiers within the industry at large and as regards to contemporary dress. In this chapter, I examine the place of these four modifiers and their modifications through a thematic interpretation of shared experience in order to explore what these commonalities may mean for understanding body modification and lived experience.

Upon examination of similarities and differences across participant narratives, three conceptual areas are used to structure the interpretation of their collective experiences: *Self-expression*, *Creation*, and *Profession*. *Self-expression* is defined as those components of experience that are related to the modifier's social roles as well as experiences outside of her life as a professional in the body modification industry. *Creation* is the experience of the process leading to the creation of a modification, from a purely artistic perspective as well as through the act of modification co-creation between the modifier and her customers. *Profession* is defined as those lived experiences pertaining to the body modification industry, from initial interest in the community to the

apprenticeship process as well as thoughts and perceptions as women within this community.

Each conceptual area is discussed in detail in the following parts of the chapter, and is framed around meanings that surface within and throughout the modifiers' narratives. Within each area factors that connect the individuals' experiences to the shaping of an overall understanding of the modifiers' experiences form the themes. Self-expression, for example, frames the similarities in background and living situation among the modifiers. Included within this area is the participant's choice in personal modifications, as well as meanings of her decision to be modified. Creation, the second area, involves the process of creating modifications and the relation of modification creation to other artistic endeavors. This includes the experience of co-creation, or the negotiation of the creative process in work done for clientele. Themes within Profession, the third area, examine the point where art and consumption meet within the body modification industry. This includes exploring the modifiers' perceptions of their occupations and their place within the industry.

The three areas are not meant to be understood as unrelated concepts. That is, each conceptual area is a part of the larger whole of the experiences of the four modifiers. Therefore, factors discussed within one area relate to those explored in the other two. Two underlying factors of experience are important to the interpretation: the participants as modified and modifiers. Similarly, modifications as individual dress practices and as work to be completed on others are seen as separate factors operating within the experiences of the women. Lastly, it is important to point out that even though the

thematic interpretation was developed from the participant's personal narratives, my understanding of their experiences and my own experiences with body modification aids in the structure of the themes and further shapes the representation of their experiences as modifiers.

Self-Expression

There are several factors of experience that surface across the modifiers' narratives. There are, however, also a number of differences, particularly in terms of their backgrounds. The four women grew up in different locations, but all four now work in Raleigh and Greensboro, North Carolina, the second and third most populated cities in the state (<http://census.gov>). Although their ages range from mid-twenties to mid-thirties, it is interesting to note that they all started working in the body modification industry at the same time in their lives – early to mid twenties. Each has some level of post-secondary education, most with an emphasis on visual arts. The marital status of each woman varies, one participant is single, one is in a relationship, and the other two are married. None of them have children or plan on having them in the near future. For example Wendi, although currently married, decided to postpone having children due to the demands on her time created by her choice to work in body modification. Finally, each of the women made the decision to work in body modification in part out of a desire to actively engage in a creative work environment.

For each, the relationship between a personal interest in body modification and the decision to become a modifier was clear. Initial exposure to body modification practices impacted the decision to work as a professional in the industry. These

modifications also helped contribute to a sense of identity and understanding of social roles. Although each woman sees her modifications as contributing in unique ways to her home and social environment, each finds the creation of a separate space for a private life to be a challenge.

Personal Modifications

All of the women first experienced modification by getting their ear lobes pierced; three of the four did this in their early teens and the other when she was in her early twenties. Three of the modifiers pierced themselves, both successfully and unsuccessfully, in their mid-teens. Locations for these piercings included ears, navels, and nipples. Those who had their ears pierced did so in a jewelry store setting by piercing gun. Unless it is pierced and stretched to a larger gauge by a professional body piercer with a piercing needle, ear lobe piercing is no longer considered to be a true “body modification” but, is instead, a standard piercing. Upon reflection, all of the participants remembered their first body modification experiences as being fairly unpleasant. Some commented on the level of personal interaction with their piercer as being disappointing, others cited concern about the technical nature of the modification. Herself now a modifier, Jenn reflects on her first piercings, done underage and without a guardian present:

J: ... when I was 13 or 14 I went to a tattoo shop. This was probably a bad idea, since I was underage, to a place that didn't care much. But, if they don't care about your age, what else don't they care about?

Wendi recalls how her early experiences with being modified have helped to develop her present perspective as a professional body piercer:

W: I don't want to be one of those people who's a crackpot body piercer. I wanted to be trained by the best to be the best that I could be. Actually, all the bad experiences I had in the past have helped me become a better body piercer because I have more ethics. I don't want anyone to go through all the crazy stuff that I went through ... the wishy-washiness. Consistency is good, and being up front with people ... they're going to appreciate you more for it.

When considering their own modifications, each of the women had their most favorite and least favorite ones. Three of the four modifiers explained that their favorite modifications were due to the aesthetic result achieved by the piece, and the fourth pointed to an emotional connection with the piece (a memorial piece honoring her mother). Important to the aesthetic pieces was the connection between the woman as modified and the artist as modifier. For instance, Amy explained she likes her favorite tattoo not only because it is done in a unique style, different from her previous work, but also because she got it from a good friend. Interestingly, two of the women stated that their favorite modification is their most recent work. Jenn acknowledged this when she spoke of her favorite tattoo:

J: I think I like it because I wear it with confidence. I also love the artwork. And, it may be the newness of it. I've only had it for a little over a month and am still finishing it up.

Similarly, least favorite modifications were often due to the aesthetic effect. Two participants feel that their least favorite piercings did not look right, and ultimately removed them for aesthetic reasons. Additionally, two participants mentioned specific

tattoos as being their least favorite because the design no longer suits their taste. Lacie mentions flash tattoos that she no longer likes because they are popular among the general public to the point of being considered “cliché.” Amy recalls obtaining her least favorite tattoo:

A: It’s just something I drew. It’s not very good. I know if I drew it now it’d be a lot better. That’s the best example that I would never get anything that I drew myself, because my taste changes and my style changes constantly...

Aesthetics are an important part of the body modifications chosen by each of the women. While each woman has a large part of her body covered by modifications, each has her own interpretation as to how she wants to look through her body modifications. Three of the participants combined body piercing and tattoos to achieve their total modifications. In contrast, the other has tattoos but not piercings, explaining that, “I just, and I know I’m going to step on someone’s toes, but I just don’t see the artistic value of it [piercing].”

Placement and style are equally important to their choices in modifications. Wendi prefers all of her modifications to be symmetrical in order to create a sense of balance on the body. In contrast, Jenn explains that though many of her piercings are symmetrical she has intentionally created a “sweeping” asymmetrical look through the placement of her tattoos.

This sense of placement and aesthetics clearly enters into the women’s future plans for receiving new tattoos. Each of the participants spoke of her body in terms of an unfinished canvas, one that will always be added on to. None of the participants included

piercings in the list of anticipated future modifications, even though both piercers (Wendi and Jenn) received piercings within a month of the completion of the research. This may be due in part to the relatively temporary nature of piercings as compared to tattooing. The women who have been working in the industry for the longest period of time (Wendi and Lacie) have a larger portion of their bodies modified as compared to the other two. All of the women are considering touching up previous work and are open to the possibility of additional modifications in the future. One participant spoke of her modifications as a canvas, but unlike the others, emphasized the aesthetic appeal of negative space:

J: I don't see myself as being covered. I like the look of bare skin in contrast with the tattoos. I don't think I'd ever get my forearms, above my collarbones, or my legs. Definitely not my legs. I like that I can wear a skirt and high heels and not have my tattoos showing. I like the look of a sleek leg in high heels.

Social Roles and Expectations

Many of the participants explained that their modifications are for themselves rather than having a relational position within their identities. Lacie explains the personal importance of her tattoos by saying:

L: ... everything is stuff that's just symbolic to me and I know why've I've got it. But, nobody else really gets it and they don't have to. It's one of those things that I just did for myself for different periods of my life...

However, at the same time, many of the participants acknowledge that perceptions of modifications by family members have had an impact, and especially when they were first getting involved in the modification industry. Jenn remembers her mother being

emotional about it and “crying a lot.” However, she also thinks that both of her parents have become more understanding with time and that her relationship with them continues to be strong.

All of the participants talked about the interactions they have with others when spending time outside of the workplace. For the most part, the comments they receive are positive in nature, but they also get negative responses to their modifications, for which they have had to develop a thick skin. In social situations, as the participants find, people will often make certain assumptions based on their modifications. Jenn says, “I do what I can to be a good person and still look the way I look. Sometimes people confuse the two.” For Lacie, modifications can actually be useful in deciding who she will interact with:

L: ... as far as people going, ‘Tattoos, that’s disgusting!’ I will never waste my time talking to [that person] because they won’t bother [to get to know] me. So, I’ve just weeded out [an] asshole. It helps you weed out [people] that judge [others] by the way they look. You don’t want to talk to those people anyway. So, they automatically [assume] something about you and avoid you.

Because of their large number of modifications, and the visibility of these modifications, the women are often approached by others who expect them to have a certain level of knowledge on the subject, whether or not people know them to be industry professionals. As Wendi explains, something as mundane as a trip to the store can result in an impromptu consultation:

W: ... I can’t go to the grocery store without someone going, ‘I noticed your piercings ... I have this belly button piercing...’ I can either say no and let them go, but there’s my conscience ... it’s like, ‘Don’t you let that girl walk away ...

and not tell her how to take care of it.’ So then I end up getting into a big endeavor when I go to ... the store. It’s really hard to get away from it sometimes.

All of the women are very understanding and ok with answering the questions put to them by complete strangers. However, they all find that it can become particularly frustrating because individuals rarely, if ever, recognize each is more than the sum of her modifications. The personal modifications of the women become an avenue for social discourse. Their modifications are highly visible and stand out to others in society, marking them as being involved in the body modification industry. Through their modifications the women bring evidence of their work with them wherever they go, much like an artist walking through life carrying a painting or sculpture. Amy further emphasizes the importance of the person’s attitude when approaching her outside of the workplace:

A: ... if they’re respectful, then I’m the last person who’s not going to want to answer a question. But, there’s a lot of rude people depending on where you go, obviously. ... like, if people just grab you and not even ask, ‘Hey can I see that?’ They just grab you. Or, they ask how much something is going [to cost] and you can’t tell them. You’re like, ‘I’m a tattoo artist, yes, but I can’t tell you how much it’s going to be unless I see it.’ Immediately asking that of you when they’ve just met you. It’s annoying, but it happens.

Lacie discusses how these exchanges often happen at inappropriate times, but that no matter how inconvenient, she must always supply a friendly and knowledgeable response:

L: ... It gets kind of tiring to be the ambassador of good will on tattoos ... You know, you’re at dinner and you’re trying to have a good meal and some jackass comes up to you, ‘Did that hurt? How much did that cost?’ And you want to say,

‘I didn’t come up ... and ask you how much your 6th grade education cost, did I?’ [jokingly] You want to say that so bad, but you don’t get to say that to these people. You have to say, ‘Yeah, I got them done at Phoenix, they do good work. Thank you.’ You know, you gotta be as polite as possible and it gets kinda frustrating because it’s always the same dumb questions.

Separation of Space

All of the women describe working relatively long hours, on average between 50 and 60 hours a week, and therefore express how important it is for them to separate their work from home lives. Each of the modifiers sought different ways to achieve this desired separation. Three of the women choose to live within a few miles of their place of work for an easier commute. However, because of this close proximity, many of them find it difficult to go out in public without being recognized. As Lacie explains, this can often be challenging:

L: It does drive me nuts if I’m [working] till the end of the night, and I’m at the bar after work. Say, having a drink and someone wants to come up to me and say, ‘Dude, I want to get this tattoo done, and I want it to look like this. And, I’m gonna come and see ya.’ And I want to say, ‘Then come in and see me when I’m at work. Cuz I’m not at work right now, and I’m not really gonna remember what you told me. And, at the moment I don’t really care. But, if you come in when I’m working I’ll be happy to help you out.’

Wendi feels it particularly crucial to separate her home from work, so she chooses to live in a town nearly an hour away from her shop. This is the town where she grew up, and for her it is important that people there know her as Wendi rather than as “Wendi the Body Piercer.”

For all of the women, family is particularly important to their personal lives and for providing a break from their work. Jenn stays working in the area that her family lives

so she can visit them when she has the chance. It is also very important for Lacie to remain in contact with her family and she makes a point of visiting her Michigan hometown twice a year. However, whether Lacie is going home or on vacation abroad, she often brings her work with her, for better or for worse:

L: ... when I was in Australia I spent easily 200 hours tattooing. Same thing when I go home for Christmas ... and summer. I've got to have my equipment with me. People are waiting. Everybody wants to get work done. It's kind of rough because it ends up cutting into your free time. But, it's also cool because you can do it anywhere ...

On a social level, separation between work and home space also appears to encroach on their general free time. Most described how finding time to spend with friends is a challenge because they work late nights and weekends, times when most other people are off. The two tattoo artists (Lacie and Amy) describe additional problems in that they often need to take drawings home to complete them in time for customer appointments. However, Amy sees this as a condition not just of her job but of most occupations, really more of a hazard of being in the work world: "you can never really leave [your] job. But, other people have that too, they bring their paperwork home. It's just I bring my paperwork home and draw." Moreover, all of the modifiers place importance on art within their lives, and particularly outside of their occupations as modifiers. Although only some of the women create artistic pieces outside of the workplace, they all see an interface between their creative process and art in general.

Creation

While all of the women see their work as artistic, as a creative act, they also point to the interactive, human relationships required by body modification. The modifiers clearly consider their work to be somewhere between the two realms of art and consumerism; that is, a piece of art *and* a consumer good. Consequently, each faces the need to negotiate her creativity with meeting the needs of her clientele.

Considering the division between pure creation and consumption, the modifiers see their art as distinct from, but related to, work. They talk about the artistic process of modification creation, the relation of modification to artwork, as well as their personal technique, style and inspiration. Because the creation of a body modification involves the input of a customer, the act of providing a body modification requires a level of give and take, as well as commitment to the overall experience, from assisting the customer with the modification selection through the process of making the modification.

Inspiration

Each of the women came to work as modifiers with a preexisting interest in art. Three of the participants had some post-secondary training in visual art. Of the three, Jenn was the only one to complete a Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts. Amy, the only one without any formal art training, was raised by parents who were artists who had an interest in the field. Forbidden by her parents to get a degree in art because an artist's pay is not guaranteed, Amy instead completed a degree in North American Studies. All of the participants feel that the work they do as body modifiers is a part of the larger art world

and that their previous training has helped to prepare them for the modification work they do.

Although all feel their work is related to the art world, how they see their artistic training as related to the work they do varies based on the different types of modifications they are involved with. Each feels that, though art training is not necessary, it is particularly helpful in the successful completion of pieces. Interestingly, the two women who work as body piercers describe the use of their art training differently than do the tattoo artists. Both Jenn and Wendi, the body piercers, see their earlier artistic training as useful in understanding angle, proportion, and piercing placement. For Jenn, this basic knowledge relates to her success as a piercer.

J: It's helped with my sense of angles and placement and knowledge of the body ... for piercing. Definitely, the more art training you have the better piercer you're going to be.

For Wendi, an understanding of proportion helps her in discussing with clients possible sites for piercing:

W: ... If somebody comes in and wants something that really doesn't suit them you have to be able to tell them ... But, you want to have something as back up Because of the art school background and knowing proportions ... A lot of times when I see people, I see them with piercings in my head, so I can definitely see how those are related.

In contrast, tattoo artists explain the relation between their work and other artistic fields in terms of the actual pieces being created. In particular, the connection between tattooing and drawing or painting is important. Both women feel that while the two media

are similar, they are not the same as tattooing. Amy believes that many people first become interested in tattooing through an interest in art, but goes on to explain that skill in one does not necessarily mean skill in the other:

A: ... I think artistic ability, of course, you have to have some ... Just because you draw doesn't mean you can make it as a tattoo artist. I think that's how a lot of people get into it. They think they can draw and they draw a couple of tattoos for their friends, and they think that makes them eligible for being a good artist, and it really doesn't. ... There are tattoo artists who can't necessarily draw really well, but they can apply a flash piece really smooth and clean.

Amy and Lacie both find that working on art outside of tattooing is helpful, particularly because of the increased demand on tattooists to create "moving masterpieces." As Lacie explains:

L: ... it's not just some dirty old scratcher putting your wife's name on ya and crossing out your girlfriend's name. ... Now its beautiful masterpieces that people get to walk around with. ... So, learning more conventional artistic techniques is just going to help [me] be a better artist anyway. But, there's so much difference in tattooing ... and drawing that you've got to learn how to apply [artwork] to a tattoo.

The relative permanence of body modifications also plays an important role in the way the women view their work. Jenn recalls her earlier work at a leather gallery as similar to the work she does as a body piercer saying, "... because you're sewing things you have to get them at the right angle, or else you've got a hole in the leather." Similarly, Amy describes the permanence of tattooing in terms of the lives of the clients she is affecting through her artwork:

A: ... I consider myself an artist. I just work on a different type of canvas, a moving canvas that's not sitting still, its breathing. It's ... a very tedious kind of art because people always think it's a no-no. But, I think it's one of the hardest art forms ever because you always have the stress of it being permanent. ... You basically change someone's life ... it's very stressful like that. ... But, I love it. I wouldn't have it any other way, but you have to push yourself everyday.

For all of the women, interaction with clients is an integral part of the work they create.

In the case of one of the participants, Wendi, this customer involvement serves as the main source of inspiration for the work she creates, both as a piercer and as a freelance artist. Wendi explains that the important part of creating a successful piece of artwork for any client is to first correctly interpret their needs:

W: A lot of times I get inspired by each individual ... especially my freelance work, I try to get to know the person better ... and then they inspire me to do whatever. Because a lot of times I'll have someone come in wanting paintings and they'll be like, 'I have no idea what I want, but here's the color of my room. Go for it.' It's wide open, so I try to figure out their personality, what they do like, what they don't like.

Lacie and Amy both find inspiration for their work in more conventional art media. For example, Amy often works on watercolor pieces in her spare time and says that not only does this provide an area for her to explore ideas, but that the similarity of watercolor to tattooing helps her practice the feel of tattooing. She mentions a current source of inspiration as an example:

A: ... for Christmas I got this book, it's called *Oceans* or something. It's ... this huge book and it's got ... everything you could ask about on oceans and has all these different pictures. It makes me want to do a series of paintings, or something, just on ocean life. I think painting helps a lot; it really gives me a feeling for certain things. ... Especially watercolor ... I think it's really similar to

tattooing because you lay the black down first, that you move onto other stuff, then you do your white highlights last.

Such artistic endeavors outside of the work environment provide a way to explore inspirational ideas that can ultimately help them in their work. Conversely, their work in modification also provides a perspective for their artistic endeavors. For Wendi, her work in modification provides an outlet for self-critique that her other artwork does not:

W: ... I see my body piercing a little bit different than my other work. Because artists are their own worst enemy ... you treat yourself harder than anyone else would. Your perspective on how you feel about a painting will change based on when other people see it. So, when it comes to a lot of my paintings and drawings I get a little self-conscious. With my piercings unless it's someone who gets something that may not look good on their face, or whatever, that's the only time I get uncomfortable ...

Customers can also provide inspiration. Lacie finds that clients who come in wanting particularly interesting designs can be fun to work on and provide the impetus to continue her work as a tattoo artist. She recalls one customer who came in for an unusual design:

L: ... I had a girl come in, she wanted a butterfly. And I [thought], 'Man, not a butterfly.' And, then she showed me [the design] and it was a stick of butter with fly wings on it and, it was the best tattoo I did all day. It was so much fun to work on. I like horror [images] too. Because it's just more fun to draw.

All of the artists have portfolios of successfully completed pieces that serve as a catalog of their work for prospective clients to view. In addition to these portfolios, both tattoo artists keep copies of designs that they enjoyed or are proud of on the walls of their workstations. However, each points out that, again, the level of inspiration and artistic

engagement with modifications must always be balanced with the needs and expectations of customers.

Customer Involvement

Each of the participants finds that her involvement in the customer's decision making affects the work she creates. Although they all agree that the field of body modification is artistic, actual pieces they create on a daily basis are not always art, but instead are more often a consumer product. The line between pieces that are artistic and those that are not often has to do with the customer's design choices. If the modifiers are able to do a piece that is more interesting or challenging to them, they are more likely to see it as "art." Pieces that are more mundane, popular among customers and, therefore produced frequently, are not necessarily seen as art, but instead as daily tasks to be completed.

The women view the task of selecting a modification and process of receiving a modification as part of the larger modification consumption experience. However, all of the modifiers stress that because each customer is different, the level of participation and interaction required with each client varies. When examining her role in relation to the process of selecting a modification, each woman sees her level of involvement differently. This involvement is based in part on personal choice related to the risk involved in making suggestions to a customer, and is related to how open to suggestions the customer is. In addition to being involved in the customer's selection, the women see their role in the process of receiving the modification as being important to the customer's overall experience. Some of them even feel that though completing the

technical aspect of the modification well is important, the emotional environment they help to create (eg., a pleasant experience) could be just as or sometimes even more important than the modification itself.

When deciding whether or not to help customers select modifications, each of the women takes into account the attitude of the clients as well as their own feelings about level of involvement. Customers tend to enter the shop with a range of ideas about their modifications. Some will come in knowing exactly what they want while others might only know a few details they desire, like size or location, but in general do not have a clear idea of what they want. As Amy describes, the level of freedom given to her by her customers is often related to the level of trust that has been established in their relationship:

A: ... There's two different types of clients. The one group is people who don't really care too much about their tattoo, it's their first tattoo. So, they're looking through the flash rack and they just want to pick something. You probably do their first tattoo and this is where some sort of ... trust bond starts. ... You do a solid tattoo on them and next time they'll come back and ... they might let you draw something for them ... Or, they've seen your work ... and they'll give me a lot more freedom. ... Once the relationship starts if they like it or get a larger scale piece and they keep coming back. They might not even say what they want. They'll just come in and say, 'This is the part of my body that I want work on.' Which is really hard for me because people really start to trust you and spend time with you and then they're really open to doing whatever you want, so you really can't tell.

While all of the women enjoy some level of freedom to create what they believe would look best on a customer, too much leeway can also be difficult. This situation is particularly challenging to the modifiers because they may not know their clients well and feel uncomfortable making a large part of the decision for them. Moreover, if a

customer seems particularly unsure about what to get, as Wendi explains, it can often be an indication that they are not quite ready to acquire the modification and may need to put more time into thinking about whether or not it is something they really want:

W: I'll have people in and go, 'I want to get a hole poked. I just don't know what.' That's tough, because I never want to say you should do this, and then they hate it. They want me to tell them what they want. I can make suggestions, but I'm not going to tell them. This is the way it works ... girl comes in has a beautiful nose ... perfect for a nostril piercing, and you tell them and they're like, 'I don't know...' So, I look at their ears and it's like, 'Oh, you could do your tragus ...' And they're like, 'Uh, no that'd hurt.' You know, so ... everything you bring up is 'ew,' so they need to do more research and figure out something. Those are the ones that you know are getting something just to get it and they're going to take it out in a few weeks ... those are the ones that ... don't know what they want yet. Drives you nuts.

All of the women are comfortable giving their opinions on client's modifications when safety is an issue. If any modification is particularly dangerous for the customer, each of the women feels it is her duty to offer safer alternatives, or if necessary, to turn the customer away. However, each discusses her role in making aesthetic or design-based suggestions differently. Jenn sees her role as fairly uninvolved and prefers not to make any suggestions. She believes she should tell customers what piercings are possible, but she never offers her own opinion about a piercing. The other three women feel comfortable making suggestions to their customers about what might work best given their individual design choices. Lacie explains that she is more likely to make a suggestion about the location some clients chose for tattoos:

L: ... if someone wants a tattoo on their neck, and they don't have any other tattoo, and they don't have a permanent job for the rest of their lives or a really

big savings [laughs]. I try to talk them out of it. I try to talk people out of hands, face, anything like that.

However, she also finds that the longer she has worked as a tattoo artist, the more difficult it is to make suggestions other than modification location or safety. When it comes to design choice or style she might make a few suggestions, but she is not prone to do so anymore. She believes that ultimately it is the customer's body and thus his or her choice: "I'll do what I can to dissuade a client from a bad choice, but I'm nobody's mother."

Amy will often discuss a client's choices with her or him to provide design suggestions. At first she found this difficult because she was afraid of offending someone, but now she sees it as important to giving her customer the best possible tattoo. For Amy, most important is her ability to explain in a respectful and polite manner why a certain design will not work, and to suggest alternatives so that the customer is more receptive to her advice. Of the four women, Wendi is the most comfortable with a high level of involvement in the customer's piercing selection. When customers come in for a modification and they seem open to suggestions, she will often give them advice on possible piercings based on their body proportion and what would be best suited to them:

W: I've had people come in before who want to get a beauty mark pierce and they've got this really thin top line and it's just gonna kinda be hovering there. But, if you've ever noticed most people who have a really thin top lip have a really full bottom lip and a labret is going to be way more attractive on that person than a beauty mark. And, I will tell that person, 'I know you're really interested in a beauty mark, and if you're really interested we'll do that. But, have you ever considered a labret? Because you have a beautiful bottom lip and it'll really accentuate that.'

Involvement in the Modification Process

Similar to their involvement in the customer's modification selection, all of the women see their role in the actual process of modification differently depending on their interpretation of their own work. Most of them see their role as extending beyond simply "poking a hole in somebody" to include ensuring that their customer is physically, emotionally, and even physically comfortable during the modification experience.

Two of the participants believe a high level of involvement can help customers through the body modification process, and feel that the work they do can serve a healing function. For these two modifiers, body modification offers an opportunity to help customers with psychological problems from cutting to more general self-esteem issues. For instance, both women recall experiences with customers who came in seeking body modification as a treatment for cutting tendencies. Following the advice of a psychologist, these clients were there to overcome their problems, and the modifiers see this as a positive part of the work they do as professionals. As Wendi explains,

W: ... with piercing it's gonna be way less abrasive to her body. She's gonna be more open about her pain and whatever stress she's going through. But, it's not gonna be as permanent, she's not going to scar herself the way she had been. ... The wonderful part of her turning to body piercing instead of cutting was she was doing something a little healthier ... she wasn't alone [while it was happening]...

Lacie points to the outcome that can be achieved by receiving a body modification:

L: ... [They] would cut themselves and leave scars and once they started getting tattooed they stopped cutting. Because they found that they could go through the cathartic experience of inflicting pain on themselves but have a beautiful reward

from it instead of scars and shame, which is what I think a lot of them are dealing with. And, it really did actually stop some of those kids.

In addition to helping customers with psychological problems, the participants have found that body modification is important in helping to improve their customers' self-esteem issues as well. As Wendi has found, modification may not only improve current levels of self-esteem, but their new modifications may also serve as a catalyst for important lifestyle changes:

W: ... we had a young lady come in ... a very large girl ... coming in pricing a tattoo for future reference. And I was like, 'Why future reference?' And she was like, 'I don't want a bunch of strangers looking at my fatness.' ... She came in and got this beautiful ginormous flower bouquet tattoo on her ribcage and it ended up beautiful. And she actually came in and said, 'You know, I'm totally not ashamed to pull my shirt up. Because I have something beautiful on something that makes me uncomfortable.' ... It does change a person, it does make their self-esteem better and it maybe gives them that motivation...

Both Wendi and Lacie express frustration when the important psychological factors involved in body modification are not taken seriously. As Wendi explains, many people fail to see the fact that modification helps "boost people" and instead assume that modifications are limited to "trashy tattoos." Lacie sees this as an important, but less accepted, aspect of body modification when compared to other augmentations to the body:

L: What really pisses me off is that a woman can get a boob job, and go into work. But, if you have visible tattoos you can't show that like you can show your boobs. That doesn't make any sense at all to me. They're both all about how a person wants to be. I think it can be really therapeutic.

Alongside more extreme cases of body modification used as treatments for disorders, most of the modifiers are regularly involved with customers on an emotional level. Three of the women mention a level of responsibility that they feel is inherent to what they do. They all believe that since body modification is their occupation, it can be somewhat monotonous for them, but it is anything but for many of their customers. Often the experience of receiving a body modification is a very emotional one due to the permanence of the decision. Amy finds that though it can be difficult at times, this level of involvement is important to her work as a tattoo artist:

A: It's like sometimes you end up being the psychologist; just listening. ... There's this trust bond relationship that starts ... I guess it's because you have such a big impact on them physically that they feel like they can open up to you. Sometimes it's a little overwhelming, but in general, I like that. I feel like you have a lot of responsibility ... because you're changing someone's appearance forever, and it's something that they're going to remember for the rest of their lives. So, if I make this a ... pleasant experience, then they have something to look back on. If I'm mean to them; if I don't make it comfortable, anything that's ... a negative thing, this will be a negative experience for the rest of their life. So, I feel like you really change someone's life in a really important way.

For all of the modifiers, the customer's emotional state is important to the overall ease and ultimate success of the modification. Therefore, it is just as important for the customer to have an enjoyable experience as it is for the modification to be the best quality possible. As Lacie explains, a customer's comfort level will definitely impact the success of the tattooing experience:

L: If you're good to your customers, they're good to you. People who might not tip usually, would if you go the extra mile. And, I try to make them comfortable. If they're comfortable they're not going to pass out, they're not going to freak out; they're going to relax. They're gonna try to be tough for ya. But, if you're

making them feel awkward or if you're putting them out, they're not going to have any fun with it, which means it's gonna be harder to do. I just try to make it a good experience for people, because I always feel like it's a good experience for me.

The experience of body modification can also be impacted by the atmosphere created by others who are present. All participants find that customers who come alone and receive modifications are often easier to deal with than those who come in with friends. When clients are alone, regardless of their gender, they are often more apt to listen to the modifier's advice and suggestions than when they are in a group. Additionally, all of the participants find that men and women act differently when coming in for modifications in large groups. When on their own, women seem to have a higher pain tolerance than men, but when part of a group, they can be much more difficult because they tend to dramatize the experience:

A: ... Women are tougher than men when it comes to pain tolerance. I've never had a woman pass out on me, but I've had a guy pass out on me. ... But if I have a whole group of girls ... in their 19, 20, 21 ... if I have a whole group come in it becomes a big ... production, with a lot of screaming and, 'Ow, that hurts' and that kind of thing. So, I think just from that point of view, girls, I'm not going to say women, but girls are a little harder to deal with.

Part of making sure that a customer receives the best modification possible involves seeing to it that the process is done safely. As Wendi explains, sometimes customers do not understand the level of involvement required when piercing a customer, or that her job goes well beyond the physical pierce:

W: I'd like to think that I'm more than just poking a hole in somebody. But, unfortunately some people see it that way. For example, I'll have a customer that comes in and says, 'Can you hurry up and do my navel? I'm on my lunch break

and need to be back in 15 minutes.’ This is not a hurry up get it done kind of feel. You have to put all of the other aspects in it too. When I tell this to people they’re kind of like, they expect me to make it happen for them. And I’ll be like, ‘Well, if you’re really in a hurry now you may want to come back when you’ve got more time.’ And they’re like, ‘Well, what are you gonna do? You’re just gonna poke a hole in me.’ And it’s like, okay, ‘Well, what if you have a difficult ... whatever. What if it’s a navel and you have an offset to your navel and it takes a minute to get everything lined up. Or what if we do the piercing and you get woozy or lightheaded? We have to take care of you.’ There’s a lot more to it than poking a hole in someone.

It is clear that through training and experience, these modifiers have developed a strong commitment to the customer as well as to their craft. For each, the work she does reflects not just on her, or her shop, but on the industry as a whole.

Profession

When asked to explain her work, each participant talked about the historical and cultural importance of body modification in addition to the technical aspects involved in its creation. Beyond their own personal feelings about the work they do, they also related their experiences to the industry in general, and to their respective shops in particular. Personal perceptions of the body modification occupation, training and shop environment, as well as the state of the industry itself are all important to understanding their experiences as modifiers.

Personal Explanation of Work

When explaining the work they do as modifiers, most of the women find that it reflects their choice of certain methods and styles of modification. For instance, Wendi explains that she enjoys body piercing because it is a temporary form of decorating the body that allows her to be creative:

W: [If] the body is your temple ... body piercing is your yard art. ... But, basically, I decorate. I'm a typical girl, but I decorate the human body instead of a room.

This process allows Wendi to also have what she feels is a deeper connection with the client. She feels the tattooists she works with generally limit their conversations to the specific piece they are working on and what the customer needs at that point in time. With body piercing, Wendi believes that since there are fewer specific design elements to consider, this allows for more time to learn about her clients as individuals, going beyond the specific modification. Amy sees her work in terms of an art form created on a living medium, while Lacie draws from cultural history to explain her work as a tattoo artist:

L: ... I would definitely start with the cultural ties to [tattooing] because that's what allured me to tattoos. I'm part Native American and to me the native lifestyle and especially the native traditions ... Any natives too, the Maoris, South Pacific Islanders ... that practice tattooing as a part of their culture and as a part of ritual is a big influence on me. That's why a lot of my work is tribal, because it seems more symbolic, I guess. ... I would try to describe that aspect first and foremost. Then, I would also tell them it's a way to decorate ...

Rooted in the understanding of her work is each modifier's sense of technique and style in relation to the pieces she creates. While most of the women agree that technique means precision when modifying a client, they see style as much more individual and a reflection of their own unique approach to modification. For Wendi, technique is her technical ability to successfully pierce a client, and style is her approach to interacting with each individual, making sure they are comfortable, that they understand what they

need to know in order to have a good experience in the shop, and that they are taken care of throughout the life of the piercing.

Two of the modifiers think technique and style are so closely related as to be indistinguishable. Jenn explains that for her, technique is individualized, she sees technique as the way she goes about piercing a client, including what tools and methods she uses. Although Amy feels technique and style are very similar, she explains technique in terms of her ability to apply a tattoo skillfully and style in terms of the types of tattoos she prefers doing and excels in. However, while style may be important, in the field of tattooing there is a limit to the ways a modifier can do something that is truly unique:

A: ... I think nowadays everyone is striving to find their style, which I think ... is really hard because everything has been done. ... If someone says, 'Oh, you've been ripping me off.' Well, you've been ripping off someone else ... I like to do really colorful and bold tattoos, like American ... and Japanese traditional because I think it's a challenge. Because ... with American traditional everyone's like, 'It's really simple.' ... But I disagree. Because it's really simple it has to be very strong ... so you can do that with really dramatic color or shading. ... I like doing Japanese traditional ... because you really have to understand and learn a lot about how the body flows ... what looks good and where and that's really challenging from an aesthetic point-of-view.

Lacie thinks her particular style developed from her own interests in the types of tattoos she enjoys working on. As she explains, technique and style are interrelated facets of a successful tattoo artist:

L: ... Technique, if it's well rounded and studied and practiced, your technique can fit into any style. ... You can do anything if you have good technique. I think

sometimes if ... everything looks the same ... to me, that seems kind of boring. I think that if you have a good technique you can be really versatile.

Training and Shop Environment

Each of the woman's unique approach to the work she does in the body modification industry is heavily related to her background and the culture of the shop she works in. Each modifier entered the modification industry in different ways, from different backgrounds, and have different perspectives. This diversity, combined with individual training experiences, is reflected in the modifier's approach to her craft.

When discussing how she first became interested in body modification as a profession, each woman has a different story. Some of them knew they were interested in becoming artists in the field long before they began their apprenticeships, whereas others were talked into beginning an apprenticeship by friends who were already working in the industry. One participant, Lacie, recalls being introduced to the idea of working as a modifier while she received a modification. Wendi trained to become a body piercer at the urging of friends who owned a shop in her hometown, and although she had not thought of it as a career, she thought it offered potential for incorporating a number of her interests. For all of the participants, the combination of a preexisting interest in body modification coupled with the desire to work in an artistic field was what drew them into the profession.

Training to become a modifier traditionally takes place through an apprenticeship process with the trainee working under a more experienced practitioner. Although each of the women went through an apprenticeship period, the individual requirements for

training varied and were specific to their mentors. Interestingly, the women mentioned that apprenticeships can cost anywhere from two to four thousand dollars, and will last anywhere from 12 to 24 months. However, three of the women apprenticed for free and two had training periods that lasted only a few months. Regardless of the length of the formal apprenticeship, most believe that while an apprenticeship provides a firm technical foundation, it is also important to understand that working as a modifier involves continual learning. Each recalls her first modification as successful, but also feels her work has continued to improve throughout her career.

Continued training is important to all of the women, however, each goes about it differently. Some of the modifiers seek out formal avenues for training, through seminars and professional organizations. All of the women find that the most important source of training is their sense of personal drive combined with the relationships they create by networking. Amy explains that for her, learning is a crucial part of her daily life as a tattoo artist:

A: ... You learn everyday ... if you think you stop learning you should quit because you ... stagnate. ... I think you learn everyday just from watching different people, even looking at magazines. Reading other people's take on certain techniques ... just trying out new stuff. New colors, new inks, new brands of needles, or new machines...

Like Amy, Lacie feels that communicating with other modifiers and the repetitive nature of the work are both important ways for her to become more skilled as a tattoo artist:

L: ... the three years I worked [at the street shop in Raleigh] ... I learned more than I learned in [Michigan] ... Just because of the volume of customers I was

doing. ... Just from working in a shop that gave me the opportunity to do a tattoo every 20 minutes. When you're doing a name every hour, you're gonna get better at line work. Your lettering is gonna get better.

For all of the women, keeping up with industry standards is important, but formalized seminars and courses are not always the best way to improve one's modification skills. Jenn explains that while she tries to stay updated on industry news, she finds that she acquires most of her training through experience:

J: I'm always doing research on the internet, talking to other piercers, and checking out the APP [Association of Professional Piercers] website. It's important to look into trying new techniques, improving my efficiency, or any industry standards that are changing. But mainly it's just learning from experience.

It appears that style sense and technique development, as well as training opportunities, are often related to the type of environment in which the modifiers work. Each of the women work long hours on average and as a result enjoy a fairly close relationship with her co-workers, but the environment in which she works varies based on the positioning of the shop's image. Two major shop distinctions are whether it is primarily a "street shop" catering to a number of walk-in customers, or a "custom shop" which tends to modify a more loyal customer base on an appointment basis. This distinction is more often made in tattooing, which generally takes a few hours per customer, rather than piercing which often takes less time and is typically done on a walk-in basis. However, in my observations, whether the shop has walk-in versus appointment-based clientele has an effect on the store environment and the work completed within it.

Each of the locations I visited has a unique feel, created primarily through the shop's environment and positioning. Consequently, the modifiers work differently based on the shop's structure. Lacie, who had previously worked at a street shop and currently works at a shop that provides more custom work (the shop is both a tattoo studio and art gallery) explains:

L: ... well, with a street shop you just bam out one after another, it's like Wal-Mart. ... Custom shops rely mainly on their ... devout customer bases ... and [clients] come in for a particular artist I think most [of] my customers have come [to the Phoenix], and I'm excited about that.

She also found that from her previous experience working at a street shop she was able to develop her skills as a tattoo artist through repetition and the demands of tattooing multiple customers in one day. In contrast to this, in her current role as a tattoo artist in a custom-oriented shop, she often works on fewer customers with an emphasis on creating unique pieces of art for each individual. Wendi works at a store that is neither strictly a street shop nor a custom location. Instead, Kingpin focuses on the atmosphere of their location, as being a family friendly environment. She explains:

W: It's nice because, [body modification is] becoming family-oriented. We have lots of families around here and further out that we've tattooed the mom, the dad. And then the mom and dad come when the kid's 18 and they're there to get their first tattoo today. And they have this great bond with something that's so silly, like tattoos. It's just great how something so simple can bring people together. We don't tend to be a 'typical shop.' We don't have loud music playing we try to show more the 'casual side' of tattoo shops. If someone wants to bring in their kids it's ok, they're not going to hear or see anything they shouldn't.

The Industry Environment

An increasing variety of body modifications and number of individuals participating in the body modification community have combined to create an industry revolution. Yet each of the women feel that while current perceptions of the industry are changing, such perceptions are still mired in the historically negative views of body modification. On an individual level and as women in the industry, they are participating in creating a new image and future possibilities for the community. More important than technical or stylistic changes, the women point to change in perceptions surrounding the industry and the culture of the industry itself.

Some of the women believe that the level of technical advancement in the field is somewhat limited. Particularly in the area of body piercing, where the skin is not a canvas in the same way as it is in tattooing, safety limits the type of work that is feasible. Although some mention exploring more permanent modification options related to body piercing, such as surface piercing, the piercers agree that there is limited space for development in terms of new modifications to be done. As Wendi explains,

W: You can do all kind of things to lights. You can make them blue ... you can make them flicker like a candle ... you can make them strobe. But, it's still a light. Someone's already been there and done that. You can maybe do something interesting to it, add to it, but it's already been done.

Thus, the real area of change within the industry has to do with social perceptions often associated with modifications. Wendi explains how the more stereotypical views on the body modification industry are often expressed by customers:

W: ... I have teachers that come in here, and it's funny because a lot of time they're like, 'Gotta tell ya I was a little nervous about coming in here, but I see it's not a scary place.' ... We're not all named Bubba, we don't all ride big Harley motorcycles ... chew tobacco and do drugs and get drunk everyday. We really do see this as an artistic form of living art basically.

Lacie points out the historical connotation of tattoos among the general public and women's position within that understanding:

L: Tattooed guys ... that was anybody with a sailor hat on, bikers, or convicts. Women who were heavily tattooed were mainly performers or sideshow freaks. They weren't tattooed to be trendy. Some women were just 'practice skin' for their tattoo artist husbands.

Each of the women acknowledges the extent to which the community has grown, and in particular, the increasing number of women becoming both modifiers and modified.

In terms of their art, none of the women felt that there was a difference between the quality and style of a modification when created by a male versus female artist. While none of them feel particularly discriminated against or treated differently because they are women, most of them acknowledge that differences exist within the field. For Lacie the male-dominated nature of the industry played a significant role in her training:

L: ... it actually made me consider a little more what it means to be a girl in the tattooing community. I never really think about it ... I've actually noticed more things that are because I'm female. ... I didn't really think ... about it at first because it's such a male-dominated industry. ... I took a lot of shit the first three years I was doing this, and a lot from the guys I was learning from. God bless 'em, I love 'em to pieces. They're the greatest guys in the world ... they were so ruthless on me. But, it was because [of them] now I am tough as hell ... and I know they did that on purpose. 'Cuz they know how hard it is to be a tattoo artist, let alone trying to be a female [tattoo artist].

This need to develop a confident and “tough” exterior in order to be successful in the industry was echoed by Amy:

A: ... I guess women are still ... the minority. I think there's just a handful of female artists that have the confidence and the artistic ability to make it ... to make a name for themselves. ... It's a male-dominated industry; you really have to have a lot of confidence to put up with all of the guys. ... Because there's a lot of ego and a lot of drama ... there's a lot of really old school tattoo artists ... so I think the women are struggling with it.

Both Lacie and Amy feel that once they make it through the initial training, women are being readily accepted into the field because of the quality of the work they produce.

Lacie even believes that women may have somewhat of an advantage over men in the field, primarily because there are so many men in the industry it is difficult for them to make a name for themselves, regardless of skill level. Women, on the other hand, have less competition and therefore may be more easily recognized for their successes:

L: ... There's a load of guys in the industry, so it's got to be hard for [male tattooists] to make a name for themselves. There aren't a lot of us [females], so you do get a little more recognition if you get your boot straps up and get in there. You do get a lot of credit for what you accomplish [in the tattoo industry].

To gain this notoriety however, some women, as well as men, may rely on methods other than their skills as an artist to attract customers, according to Amy:

A: ... Honestly, if you're dressed up nicely and you're really flirty with a customer, you get a bigger tip. ... I think it's more so with women. If you have a certain effect on someone, why wouldn't you use it? ... But, I think there's a boundary and I think there's still people that don't see that, unfortunately.

Each of the women stresses that it is important to be considered a successful artist in one's own right, regardless of gender. Amy explains this by saying:

A: ... The nicest compliment I've ever gotten, and I know this sounds weird, a guy told me, '[Amy], you tattoo like a guy.' Which just means that just by your work, you can't tell if a guy or a girl did it; it should all be the same.

However, Wendi points out the potential women have for changing perceptions of the body modification industry. She explains that feminine traits, though not necessarily expressed by all female artists, could help bring a new perspective and audience to the community:

W: It's funny because the owner ... came up a couple of weeks ago and, even the guys in the shop up there ... were like, 'We need a little estrogen in this shop.' ... Females working in a shop, you know you're always going to see a friendly-type face. I think that it's women that are really going to make this industry start to thrive ... because most of the people coming in here are women. And, that's so cool. It's like, 'Yea! Burn your bra! Yea!' We're trying to make it to where it's not a male-dominated type of industry, and it's going to take some time, but it's started. And that's cool. I'm proud to be a part of it.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a thematic interpretation of the collective experiences of the four women modifiers. Three conceptual areas – *Self-expression*, *Creation*, and *Profession* – structure the themes that surfaced within and across the narratives. These conceptual areas were discussed in terms of their importance for understanding the experiences of the four women as both modified individuals and as modifiers. Based on the four women's collective experiences, in the next chapter I will theorize the ways that

body modification can be a site for the creation of female writing, and in so doing, further explore what it is like to be a woman working in the body modification industry.

CHAPTER VI

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

By interpreting the lived experiences of the four modifiers as individuals, a better understanding of what it is like to work as a woman in the body modification industry can be developed. Examining their combined experiences helps to explain their collective position as women who are both modified and modifiers, and sheds light on the locality of body modification within contemporary culture and the meanings associated with it. To explore these meanings, first we must examine the experiences of the modifiers as situated within a social context, and then develop a framework in which to begin defining body modification as a site for female expression.

Developed from the first two levels of interpretation, this chapter will further explore the meanings of what the four modifiers of this study do, as well as how their personal and professional use of body modification is important to their lived experience. The focus of this chapter is to locate female expression as part of the process of knowledge-making and to interpret how body modification is central to this process. To achieve this, the chapter is divided into two parts: (a) the body modification experience, and (b) female expression through body modification. In addition to being the third level of interpretation, the theorizing and discussion presented in this chapter serves to connect the experiences of the individual modifiers to the broader issues discussed within the literature review and methodology chapters.

The body modification experience is explored in the first section of this chapter. I begin with a discussion of the aspects central to understanding body modification that surfaced through the narratives of the four modifiers. Topics include the historical and social meanings attached to body modification, the cultural beliefs and values these meanings are associated with through the women's use of modifications, and the implications of these ideologies for perceptions about the growing body modification industry. This discussion leads to further questions about the role of the women as both modified and modifiers within body modification, addressed in an exploration of how the body modification experience can serve as a basis for understanding women's expression of self through such dress practices.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the possibility of female writing through the experience of body modification. Specifically, I examine how contemporary tattooing and body piercing practices can be understood as lived experience to frame body modification within the concept of female writing. I start by relating body modification as a dress practice to the concepts important to the construction of knowledge through lived experience. I then examine how contemporary body modification practices play a role in such knowledge. I conclude the chapter with an exploration of the theory of female writing as a site for understanding the experience of body modification, and in looking at the personal narratives of the four modifiers, examine how their own experiences may be explicated by such theorizing.

Body Modification as Creative Consumption

The relatively recent development of tattooing and body piercing with the larger realm of body modification practices in contemporary society has had a significant impact on the cultural meanings associated with body modification in general. Until recently, examinations of body modification were often based on historically situated social meanings (oftentimes carrying negative connotations), rather than on factors of consumption and experience related to modification creation. Further, much of the discourse surrounding body modification has focused on the male experience, leaving the female experience largely unexplored.

As established by Atkinson (2003), the use of tattooing and body piercing as a dress practice in Euro-America was seen in a fairly negative light for the first 150 years of its 200 year history. During this period, women were relatively uninvolved in body modification in any public way, with the exception of the few women who worked as sideshow attractions at carnivals. Perceptions of the industry itself, and specifically of those who work in it, are often male-oriented (Sanders, 1988). However, as Mifflin (1997) argues, women have made a significant contribution to the body modification industry, both as modified and modifiers, and have been particularly visible since the renaissance of body modification during the 1970s. Although the contributions of women should not be overlooked, it is important to examine them within the larger understanding of the field as a whole. However, it is also important to review other factors operating within the body modification industry such as the historical, consumption, and

experiential factors which have contributed to the evolution of tattooing and body piercing as popular forms of contemporary dress.

Rather than positioning women's involvement in body modification as a location for personal and creative expression, body modification has been largely understood via male-oriented conceptualizations of the field, compromising the possibility of alternative examinations of what tattooing and body piercing means for the modified female. As I will discuss below, I posit that by framing women's experiences as both modified and modifiers within an understanding of body modification as a deliberate and creative dress act, tattooing and body piercing become modes of communication used by women to express their experiences.

History of Consumption

As a contemporary dress practice, body modification provides a bridge, albeit a precarious one, between the idea of tattooing and body piercing as a commercial act taking place within a consumer-driven market and an experiential practice used to meaningfully adorn the body. This split in the understanding of body modification is reflected in both the academic and popular culture realms where in the term "body art" is often applied to the process of tattooing and body piercing. This creates an association between modification and the larger art world, but does not recognize the importance of monetary exchange and changing consumption habits in the field. Many traditional body modification practices, such as Maori moko, have occurred without commercial exchange and were instead used as culturally-specific communicative dress practices. In contrast to this is the contemporary modification, which often serves a communicative purpose, but

is obtained through commercial means. This difference is significant enough to beg the question: How is current body modification meaningful as an artistic *and* consumptive practice?

Body modification as both an artistic and consumption-driven dress practice is deeply rooted in its own evolution. Contemporary practices of tattooing can be traced back to the influence of traditional practices of diverse cultures observed by the colonialist explorers during the 18th century. Such modifications typically communicated a specific meaning expressed and understood within the ideological frame of the group. However, once early Euro-American tattooing practices began to develop in the 18th century, they were already consumption-driven. An individual who obtained a tattoo paid for it versus receiving it as a part of a culturally meaningful act, such as a rite of passage ceremony. By the mid-to-late 1800s, those individuals who were heavily tattooed often made a living by their modifications, charging crowds of onlookers to view the spectacle of their marked skin, thereby placing modification squarely within the realm of a consumption experience. Although the importance of the religious/cultural aspects of modification were stressed during the tattoo renaissance of the 1970s, the actual process of receiving a modification continued to take place within the commercial sphere, as an individual who sought modification did so via a monetary exchange within a “modification” shop.

This interplay between the consumptive and artistic nature of body modification was not lost on the four modifiers within the study. Many of them spoke of the historical development of body modification as being important to the field as a whole and to their

individual interpretations of the modifications they receive and place on others. Each spoke of personal meanings attached to their modifications and the need to frame them as purposeful acts of artistic expression. However, the women also understood the importance of their work as a consumer-driven practice that “paid the rent.” They understand and honor the historical development of modification while at the same time challenge past perceptions and push the field to new levels of success. For them body modification is more than its past, in that it includes a growing number of modified individuals, modifiers, and styles of work, along with a myriad of personal and social meanings.

Historically, the number of individuals pursuing extensive modifications through tattooing and body piercing has been relatively few. Lacie echoed the notion that heavily tattooed individuals were often those of the lowest levels of society, including criminals and bikers. However, since the 1970s, an increasing number of individuals from all walks of life have begun seeking out tattoos as a form of personal modification. As body modifications have become more mainstreamed within the fashion system, styles and quality of pieces have developed to meet the increasing demands of consumers. Each of the women felt that modification has grown from being a simple mode of dress to a much more artistic endeavor requiring that modifiers be artists in their own right. Lacie described how the industry moved from “scratchers” who provided poorly executed pieces of work using unsafe tools to the use of sophisticated equipment to produce complex designs with a focus on health and safety. History, however, did surface as important to the artists’ approaches to modification style. For example, Amy uses the

American traditional styles made popular by early tattooists as inspiration for developing her personal style. She likes to work with traditional tattoo designs, particularly American and Japanese, because to execute such pieces requires she have an excellent understanding of color and shading as well as body proportion. Lacie is also inspired by early tattoo design as a modified individual and a modifier. For her, the fact that traditional groups from around the world use tattoos for cultural expression is linked to the desire for her own tattoos to have symbolic meaning for her as a modified individual.

An understanding of the historical development of body modification can shed light on the separate but related concepts of body modification as consumption within the larger fashion system, and the uniquely personal meanings expressed by tattooing and body piercing as dress. Each of the modifiers within the study pointed to this relationship often when discussing their work and their personal modifications especially in relation to what is happening in terms of contemporary dress. For the modifiers in this study, the difference between the everyday work world at the shop and the more personal and spiritual significance of artistic expression was how they justified what they do as modifiers. Often, their own modifications pointed to particular stories of self-expression, and were discussed in relation to the understanding of the self. Yet a tension exists between what they do as modifiers and their need for self-expression, as the latter is often compromised by the desires of the customers whose needs the modifier must meet to create the piece.

All of the modifiers within the study expressed an awareness of the historic marginalization of modified women as well as women working within the body

modification industry. A male-dominated industry, women were historically involved only by association with husbands or fathers who were modifiers. However, due in part to the increased demand in artistic skill brought on by the renaissance of the 1970s, women have increasingly gained visibility in the industry. This is echoed by the women in this study, in that while they know they are in what is still a male-dominated field, there is room for them to prove themselves through talent and success.

Modification as Consumption

As explained by Atkinson (2003), contemporary forms of body modification are part of the modern market economy, wherein consumers exchange money for the production of tattoos and body piercings done by trained professionals. This is a unique aspect of the Euro-American experience of body modification that has been explored by a number of researchers (Gans, 2000; Sanders, 1988a; Veliquette et al.; 1998; Watson, 1998). Traditional body modification practices, in contrast, are often less focused on the consumption of a modification. Such practices, instead, are typically culturally and socially grounded in the ideologies of the group for whom the practice is meaningful. Modifications identify individuals as part of the culture as a whole and may communicate specific information about the individual's role within society. In the case of most contemporary modifications, little more than the wearer's role as "consumer" is expressed, with the exception of those modifications, such as prison or gang tattoos, identifying membership in a particular sub-cultural group.

The importance of the consumption experience in tattooing has led to the burgeoning contemporary body modification industry in recent years. This consumerism

is clearly evident within the community today. One of the earliest developments in contemporary body modification was the inception of flash art for tattoo. Flash was, and is, commercially reproduced tattoo designs intended to be reproduced by tattoo artists. In contrast to an individually designed and drawn piece, the tattooist purchases sheets of pre-made designs in order to be able to quickly reproduce them for customers.

Body modification has become a multi-dimensional industry, with an array of media outlets devoted to the practice. Today a myriad of body modification shops, conventions, magazines, websites, and television shows abound. Tattoo shops, particularly larger street shops, may even use television advertisements or sponsor events in their local communities to market their products. This influx of media attention has had a significant effect on the growth of the industry as well as the place of modifications within it. All of the participants spoke of challenges caused by a flood of modifiers in the market, a market where there are currently no standards governing who can or cannot become a modifier beyond meeting state-mandated health codes. The women believe that this has led to an increase in the number of poorly executed pieces, such that they are often asked to cover-up or remove them, or have even encouraged people to seek medical attention. However, they also point out that the increased popularity and broader exposure of body modification by the media has led to increased opportunities for educating the consumer. As a result, today's customers are well educated with a strong desire to be as informed as possible about what is being done to their bodies. This is a far cry from instances of early 20th century women receiving cosmetic tattooing under the guise of "medical treatment."

The consumer-oriented nature of contemporary body modification is certainly important to women in the study, as it serves as the primary source of income for all of them. As each explained, customer satisfaction is an important part of body modification today, however, the level of involvement varies for each of the customers they dealt with. Some of the women are comfortable offering suggestions and providing advice to customers, as a means to provide them with the best possible modification. Others prefer to be less engaged in the customer's decision-making process, providing only information on the safety of the procedure and the options available.

Although the participants see their work as modifiers primarily as consumer focused, each sees her creativity as important to her own modifications. Specifically, the modification that they do not like tends to be the more conventional or cliché image. Lacie is less fond of her earlier modifications, which are mostly flash and therefore less artistic or meaningful than the later pieces she has acquired. Wendi has even covered up tattoos because they were of a design that has become increasingly popular and no longer represents her self and identity. In contrast, each participant's favorite modifications are those that they found the most pleasing or the most personally meaningful and unique. Each of the participants value these modifications because they express their own individuality, moving the pieces out of the realm of mass consumption and into the realm of artistic expression.

Modification as Creation

In contrast to the view of contemporary body modification as a purely consumptive practice is that of modification as an outlet for individuals to artistically and

meaningfully express themselves. A number of researchers point to tattooing as an experientially-motivated act that is frequently deeply meaningful to the individuals obtaining them (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; MacKendrick, 1998; Pitts, 2003; Scutt, 1977). Some have specifically focused on the gendered meaning of body modification, suggesting an experience unique to males versus females (Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; Hardin, 1999; Mifflin, 1997). However, little attention has been placed on creative process as experienced by the modifiers themselves.

Sanders (1988a) explores the relationship between modifiers and their clients, and specifically what modifiers do to create a controlled working environment. Although Sanders provides insight into the negotiation of client choice, there is little mention of the potential for co-creation between the modified and the modifier, nor is there discussion of the final product. Moreover, Sanders only examined the experiences of male modifiers, neglecting the female experience altogether. Mifflin (1997) explores the experiences of female modifiers, however, these experiences are framed historically, and little attention is given to their experiences during the process of creation. Instead, the focus is on women's contributions to and place within the body modification industry as a whole.

Each of the women views her role in the process of creation through several different lenses. Although each feels her work exists as a part of the larger art world, each also understands her work as a means of dressing the body. In addition, as modified and modifiers, distinctions were made between the creation process and the final product. Consideration of these different levels of interpretation leads to the multi-faceted understanding of the creative experience of body modification shared by the four women.

The women within the study all perceive the work they do as modifiers to be somewhat outside of mainstream forms of dress. Jenn described body modification as being a “rebellious” act, even given its current popularity. She explains that body modification would always remain outside the bounds of social acceptability due to the negative connotations of permanent body alterations propelled by religious notions about the sanctity of the body. However, other participants point out that tattooing and body piercing are no different than other more socially accepted ways of altering the body, such as cosmetic surgery. Many are frustrated by the hypocrisy of public reaction to displays of tattooing and body piercing being far more negative than reactions to cosmetic surgery.

Although all see their work as a means of dressing the body, many prefer to associate it with other artistic outlets. That is, for them modification is comparable to more conventional art forms such as painting, drawing, and sculpture. Amy, for example, explains that she is “an artist [who is]...working on a different type of canvas.” Interestingly, while they feel that viewing tattooing and body piercing from the perspective of dress made sense, this was not a view that any had really considered prior to the research. In fact, throughout the research process many of the participants forgot that I was an apparel major, believing instead that I was a communication, journalism, or art major.

The diversity of labels used by the four women to describe their work points to the position of modifications as both dress and art. Amy, calling her work a “moving canvas,” uses color and shading in a layering technique, much like watercolor, to create a

piece, and like the others, she uses tools specifically created for her field such as inks, tattoo machines, and needles. All of the modifiers stress the importance of understanding placement and proportion in order to create aesthetically pleasing pieces for each client's body. Pointing to the holistic view of the body, this positions body modification squarely within the realm of dress, and particularly as a site where nature and culture collide and the body takes on multiple layers of meaning (Entwistle, 2000).

Beyond body modification as a form of artistic expression in dress, each woman considers her role differently when comparing what she does as a modifier with the personal modifications she has. As modifiers, all of the women believe the work they do is artistic in nature. However, this understanding seems to be more about the field as a whole rather than the individual process of modifying a customer. Additionally, the understanding of the artistic nature of the work created appears to be related to the participant's specific mode of modification. For example, Wendi feels that work she does as a body piercer is within the artistic realm of body modification, but was uncomfortable at first with labeling herself as an artist. As the research progressed, she became more comfortable with her artistic role within the shop, but still views herself as somewhat artistically inferior to the tattoo artists she works with:

W: They're tattoo artists and they draw and stuff. I draw, though not to the level they do, but actually fully seeing what I do as an art form as well. Feeling comfortable calling myself an artist has always been a dream for me – to consider myself a professional artist. I can actually do that now. Before [the research period I] was like, 'I'm a body piercer. I poke holes in people.' Now I fully feel it's an art form. It's a form of living art. It's just not permanent art.

Each of the women feels that while an artistic background is helpful during the creation of modifications, it is not crucial to the process or final product. In fact, the women feel their artistic background is more useful to the process of creation than to the final product. All of the modifiers, and particularly Wendi, believe their background aids in understanding the way a particular tattoo or piercing will look on a customer. There is clearly an understanding held among all participants that unless given a certain level of creative freedom, the process of modifying a customer is not in itself an artistic act. To be sure, for each of the women, the monotony of the process and utility of the final product were the enemies of artistic creation. For the tattoo artists, butterflies, flowers, and kanji designs are the most commonly requested and can be almost boring to do. When describing such work Lacie says, “you could train a monkey to do it.” Similarly, the body piercers explain that the practice of piercing as a whole is often repetitive because of the limited number of piercings that are possible. Wendi explains that she combats this monotony by seeing each pierce as different because no two bodies are shaped exactly the same way, and therefore the end result is different for each person. Technique is used to achieve the final product, and is seen as distinct from artistic understanding, as good technique can be achieved by anyone who can successfully follow directions. As Amy explains:

A: Just because you can draw, doesn't mean you can make it as a tattoo artist. And, there are tattoo artists who can't necessarily draw really well, but they can apply a flash piece really smooth and clean.

Overall, the woman feel the creative work they do as modifiers is limited by the need to meet the demands of clients. For each, involvement in the process of creation is perceived as the point where most of the artistic expression and inspiration can take place. While the final product might be technically precise and well-executed, if it is not an original piece then it limits them creatively and artistically. When discussing their own modifications, the same level of importance is placed on the originality and artistic nature of the piece. This originality pertained particularly to tattooing as each of the four women have pieces that were custom drawn by artists, yet based on pre-existing references. For example, Lacie's favorite piece was inspired by a 17th century engraving that was redrawn into a tattoo sleeve. Such pieces already exist as artwork in other media, yet the process of reconstructing the image for correct positioning on the individual's body allows for a degree of originality.

For body piercing, the originality of the pierce is important, but because a piercing does not depict specific imagery, unlike a tattoo the uniqueness of a piercing is based solely on its popularity. In addition, the process of obtaining the piercing is deemed important to the experience of the modification. Wendi explains that her cheeks are her favorite piercings not only because they are unique, but because the nearly year-long healing time made her feel she had really "worked for them." Unlike smaller, more easily healed piercings, her cheek piercings visibly display her commitment to body modification.

Female Expression through Body Modification

As discussed in Chapter Two, a number of scholars have explored the ways that “conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture” (Entwistle, 2000a, p. 323). In the following sections of this chapter I theorize about the value of relating body modification to knowledge-making, and in particular, knowledge that is attributed to a female mode of expression. To do this, I begin with a discussion of how historical and cultural understandings have framed women’s position in the body modification industry and relate this discussion to the experiences of the four modifiers in this study. This is followed by a return to the discussion of *l’écriture féminine*, female writing, wherein I explore how body modification can be used as a possible site for a new female form of bodily expression. I conclude this chapter by discussing the appropriateness of such theorizing for understanding how the four women of this study experience their own involvement in body modification.

The Historical Perspective on Female Experience in Body Modification

Because the body is rarely seen in a state of undress, exploring the body from a number of perspectives – whether social, psychological, cultural, or historical – is important in any discussion about dress (Miller-Spillman, 2005). Entwistle (2000b) stresses that dress frequently calls attention to gender through its culturally – and historically – specific associations. Because of the close relationship between dress and the body, body modification, which takes place on the body itself, is a particularly potent site for the examination of gender and its link to dress. As a result, according to Pitts (2003),

In reclaiming discourse, women (and sometimes men) assert that ... [body modification] can achieve ... a transformation of the relationship between self, body, and culture. ... women's anomalous body projects can provide ritualized opportunities for women's self-transformation and for symbolically recovering the female body. (p. 56)

Thus, body modification can serve as a site through which women can explore and even rewrite gendered meanings of the dressed body.

In considering the notion that body modification can be a site for recovering the female body (Pitts, 2003) it is important to understand the historical and cultural background of women's involvement in body modification. Returning to Braunberger's (2000) notion of the monster beauty of tattooed women, she suggests that the historically situated experience of women's tattooed bodies in Euro-America over the last 150 years has ensured that body modification "has developed through larger struggles of the authority of women's bodies" (p. 2). Mifflin's (1997) research on women's involvement in the body modification industry suggests that tattooing was used by women as either a commercial or a fashion practice, but rarely seen as an uniquely expressive dress act.

Within American history, there is evidence that body modification served as a means for drawing attention to the secondary position of women in society. During the 1880s, Cesare Lombroso studied 7000 tattooed individuals over a 13 year period, linking criminality with tattoos, most frequently in the form of prostitution among women (Scutt, 1974). As expressed by Braunberger (2000), tattooing was often seen as an outward manifestation of the woman's body as an uncontrollable, sexual object. For instance, in the late 1920s, a rape case in Boston was dismissed when it was discovered that the raped woman had a tattoo (Parry, 1971). As Braunberger explains, "the connection between

tattooing and sex, in which tattooing is deemed a sexual act, is staunchly refuted by men when they tattoo each other, while considered obvious when the tattooed body is female” (p. 3).

In addition to the perception of tattooed women as overly sexed objects is the notion that women’s helplessness and lack of self-control was reflected in their tattoo experiences. In the 1920s, as cosmetic tattooing gained popularity, women of the upper-class who were tattooed believed it to be a medical treatment. Women working in carnivals and side-shows often told stories of how they had been kidnapped and forcibly tattooed (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Parry, 1971). In both cases and classes of women, they were seen as victims, either of the demands of fashionable society or of an exotic tale of “tattoo rape” (Mifflin, 1997, p. 18).

In the past, females working as tattooists were considered to be less skilled than their male counterparts. Women most frequently became tattooists after being trained by their husbands or fathers. Female tattooists added sexual appeal to the male-dominated industry and would often boost sales. Women were rarely hired as apprentices and artists unless they were related to their mentors. Often the practice of tattooing was seen as inappropriate for women, as it required interacting in a relatively intimate manner with male customers (Mifflin, 1997). Today, however, the position of women within body modification has changed somewhat, but having developed from such origins, it still maintains some of the same negative connotations, as knowledge, ownership, sexuality, and place are still being negotiated.

Few, if any, tattoos and body piercings are currently completed without the knowledge or consent of the individual being modified. However, the sense that certain modifications are obtained because they have become popular in the fashion cycle suggests that women are unwittingly participating in a commercial system rather than actively choosing their tattoos and piercings. Braunberger (2000) discusses how the notion of ownership of a woman's body is confronted through the act of tattooing, as women are often asked what men in their lives, such as husbands and fathers, think of their choice of modifications. This suggests that women's bodies are not their own, but are instead a site for men to view and comment upon.

A woman's tattoos remain closely related to perceptions of her sexuality. As lower back tattoos became increasingly popular among young women throughout the 1990s popular culture has created associations between such tattoos and women's values and lifestyle choices. For instance, in an episode of the television sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*, a lower back tattoo was referred to as a 'tramp stamp.' In the 2005 movie *Wedding Crashers*, one of the characters played by actor Vince Vaughn says, "Tattoo on the lower back ... might as well be a bull's eye." Such interpretations of women's body modifications point to the overt sexuality often associated with tattooed women.

Similarly, women's involvement in the field as professional modifiers continues to be perceived as sexual in nature (Mifflin, 1997). However, Mifflin posits that women are seeking out the field in increasing numbers, and as a result, are hired for their skills in tattooing rather than their ability to increase sales from their "feminine appeal." Research on the historical and cultural development of women's body modification has also

pointed to a second-class status within this male-dominated industry. I hesitate however, to situate women's tattooing and body piercing within the larger, patriarchal understanding of body modification for two reasons. First, the body as a site for the construction of social meanings also provides a location through which lived experience can be understood. Second, women's modification choices, though perhaps viewed as sexual in nature, can be moderated through practice. Heavy modification use is seen as disruptive, whereas the smaller, more easily hidden designs and designs that stay within the bounds of acceptability have now become part of established norms for dress. Thus, the way in which women choose to participate in tattooing and body piercing practices and involve themselves in the body modification industry has already begun to re-frame the dominant understanding of the modified female body, and thus re-write women's modification experiences.

The practice of dressing the body is universal to all cultures, and is used as a means for providing the body with "an array of meanings that would not otherwise be there" (Entwistle, 2000a, p. 324). Through countless dress acts the body bears marks of differentiation such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, health, and sexuality. As explained by Elizabeth Grosz (1997), these understandings of the body are not necessarily forced on the individuals participating in the creation of meaning, but instead are enacted in ways that seem to be voluntary through "projects of adornment, ritual, habits, and lifestyle, which are encouraged by cultural values" (Pitts, 2003, p. 39). However, because these projects are stripped of anything natural they allow for meaning to be created in new ways. That is, as Grosz (1997) writes,

[I]f the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization. (p. 238)

Additionally, Entwistle (2000a) posits that dress serves as the means by which bodies are made “appropriate and acceptable within specific contexts” (p. 324). The naked body challenges the social order, the implications of which are strict regulations as to the required state of dress for given situations. Those bodies that break with cultural conventions of dress potentially disrupt the social order and are thus treated with fear and contempt (Entwistle, 2000a). Contemporary cultures often define the boundaries of modesty through the use of clothing to cover particular areas of the body. In contrast, body modifications serve to draw attention to the very skin that is to be covered, bending the rules society has created for the body and dress. As Pitt (2003) explains,

Modifications of the body that open the body’s envelope are, from a Western perspective, abject and grotesque, [but] they also place the body in a physical and symbolic state of liminality and transformation. (p. 58)

It is through this understanding that the extent of the body modification becomes significant. I posit that, while individual modifications that are easily covered by garments appropriate for specific social situations may be significant to that individual, these modifications do not challenge such socially constructed notions of the body and dress to the same extent that visible modifications do. It is only when modifications are placed in such a way as to draw attention to the body that they challenge normative understandings of the dressed body. Because women’s bodies are most often sites of

control (Hardin, 1999), in the case of modified women, such modifications become far more potent than those of their male counterparts.

Modifications, when positioned this way, also serve as a starting point for exploring lived experience via the dressed body. Framing body modification within a “new understanding of art” in which the artist is seen “not as a prophet, but only as a good worker or creator” (Robinson, 2001, p. 626), allows tattooing and body piercing to become new and expressive forms of dress. Hardin (1999) explains this as writing dress in a new way and, one that, according to MacKendrick (1998), relies on tattooing and body piercing to differentiate between individual bodies, instead of normalizing them via conventional beauty standards.

Cixous’ idea of female writing is therefore an avenue for exploring reflexive relationships between body modification and lived experience. Cixous (1976) states that the patriarchal notion of typifying women is the point to begin the exploration,

But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them [women] in the ‘dark’ ... there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. (p. 628)

Cixous further asserts that women must create a new, female way of writing their own stories. However, she stops short of defining the practice and explaining how this new form of female expression can be achieved. Female writing, instead, will be so expressive as to exist outside of the “discourse that regulates the phallogentric system” (Cixous, 1976, p. 632), in which “women’s corporeal specificity is defined and understood only in

some relations to men's – as men's opposites" (Grosz, 1990, p. 244). Although each case of female writing is individual, one catalyst for achieving this new understanding is the body itself, for as Cixous (1976) explains, women have "been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty" (p. 633).

Because women's bodies are often a source of their subjugation, Cixous (1976) posits that it is through the body that women can begin writing. To write her self through her body, a woman must no longer allow her body to be censored. Instead, "your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Cixous, 1976, p. 630). In order to write, women must

'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal ... this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. (p. 630)

Through these individual acts of writing women will "*seiz[e]* the occasion to *speak*" (p. 631). This writing will not only be on women's bodies, but will be done by the women themselves. Women will claim their own voice in the shaping of their own lived experience:

It is by writing, from and toward women ... that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence (p. 631).

Cixous often describes this female writing as taking place either in oral or written texts that are created through a specific source of bodily experience. However, I posit that the body itself should not just be the filter for understanding experiences, but that it should be the actual medium of textual creation. Body modifiers, whose work is inscribed on the body, are creating a new way for the dressed body to be understood. As expressed by Gans (2000), despite the similarity in consumption patterns of body modifications, each tattoo and body piercing is different, as the experience of becoming modified varies for each individual involved. At the same time, body modification is located squarely within the realm of consumption thereby making it an act of “political, typically masculine” writing (Cixous, 1976, p. 630). Therefore, in defining the consumption of body modification and particularly tattooing and piercing as a potential site for female writing, the modified moves back and forth between the male act of consumption and the female act of self-expression through the body. Yet, because body modification exists in the space between self-expression and consumption, it becomes a lived experience distinctive to the individual woman who chooses to implement tattooing and/or body piercing as a part of her own dress practice, and on her own body, thus making it a unique, and specifically female experience.

In a general sense, the body modification industry holds a unique place in-between the realms of consumption and artistic expression, while not being wholly claimed by either. Dress as a consumptive act propels the infinite change demanded by the fashion system and its consumers. Body modification as a permanent dress act thereby challenges the temporality of dress and the fashion system. Likewise, art was

once intended to provide a creative outlet for the privileged few. New art, however, will be different

Artistic expression will be in groups; it will convey messages which change people's lives; it will be useful and helpful, not simply 'culture on a shelf;' the artistic skills will be passed along from person to person and not confined to a small group of people. (Robinson, 2001, p. 627)

This need for self-expression that is "useable" provides a platform for modifiers to create art, not necessarily in the formal sense, but in the sense of creation wherein each person is given control to write themselves. This act challenges dominant modes of and uses for creative expression for themselves and their clients, and helps them make lived experience meaningful through body modification. This is the writing that, as Cixious (1976) explains, occurs both to and for women. I posit that through this writing, the body modification industry as a whole provides a site for female expression.

As is clear in the discussion of the experiences of the four modifiers, the common thread among them is that they each chose to express themselves through personal modifications, and in some sense, through the individual style and technique they have developed as modifiers. Although they are a diverse group of individuals, they have in common the experience of creating modifications and the daily lived experience of modifying others. In addition, they share in the experience of how modifications are understood in contemporary society, a commonality brought about by the decision to become modified and to work as modifiers. As women who work as modifiers, their experiences differ from those of males, as well as from those women who chose to become modified but are not themselves modifiers. Thus, the consciousness developed

out of experiences shared by the four women differentiates them from other modified individuals. As I will discuss, this consciousness can be interpreted as grounds for positioning body modification as a site for female writing.

Body Modification and Women's Lived Experience

Why is body modification important to understanding the lived experiences of these four women? To answer this question it is important to understand how their individual experiences relate to common factors of identity they share. Four such factors surface as important, with each factor being cumulative and contingent upon the others. First, they are all living and working in the United States. Second, they are all women. Third, each of them find creative expression, specifically body modification, to be important, and at some point chose to become modified individuals. Fourth, and the factor that most strongly connects them together, is that each of the women chose to go beyond an interest in modifying their own bodies to become modifiers. It is through the act of being both modified and modifier that the women of this study express themselves through female writing.

Grouping common factors of identity does not mean I am suggesting that the four women's experiences with body modification are the same, or that the nature or forms of their work in body modification are the same. Rather, I suggest, that through the act of expression in body modification, they comprise a group of women, as suggested by Pitts (2003), who stand in similar relation to the discourse that surrounds the contemporary practice of body modification. Shared socio-cultural experiences have served to similarly link four women together in their roles as both modified and modifier.

It is important to note that for the four women in this study, the notion of a position unique to women was not generally discussed. Instead, they positioned themselves as parts within the greater whole, a space negotiated through their individual and collective roles within the larger modification community. That is, because the four modifiers are aware of their position, they actively use their mode of creative expression to move in and out of social margins. Thus, by presenting the experiences of the four modifiers as a group, the focus is placed on the shared medium of expression - body modification - through which they have negotiated their identity, and from which they speak to the larger body modification community and the general public.

Body modification, when viewed as a dress act, challenges traditional notions of the gendered, dressed body in contemporary Euro-America. As individuals within the industry re-write and reconstruct the traditional connotation of tattooing and body piercing they transform its meaning from practices engaged in by predominantly male members of the lower class to a form of self-expression used to understand women's lived experience. Body modification is located in-between a creative form of self-expression and a consumptive, commercial dress act. It is the tension resulting from this location which shapes the experiences of the women modifiers; inasmuch as their perceptions and experiences are shaped by their personal modifications as acts of self-expression and by their role as modifiers in creating commercial pieces for clients as a professional practice. In other words, it is through their personal modifications that they view tattooing and body piercing as representative of who they are as individuals. The work created on customers is representative of themselves only in that they are

professionals within the body modification industry; they do not see this work as necessarily aiding in the construction of a self-expressive experience.

Returning to the discussion of creation presented within Chapter Five, the lived experience of these women as modifiers is constantly negotiated by meeting the needs of their clients. Although each of the women sees her role in the modification of customers as important to the completion of the piece and the experience of the client, none sees a great deal of creativity in doing so, unless the client gives them creative freedom. Instead, their self-expression is limited to their own modifications, and therefore seen as separate from their work as modifiers. However, while the women see their modifications as separate from their work as modifiers, interaction with the public often creates a connection between the two. This interaction creates a bridge by which the divide between self-expression and commodity can be crossed, creating a form of individual self-expression that can be utilized by the masses. Once again this points to the prospect of body modification as art for everyone, an avenue for self-expression by the masses, and ultimately female writing.

In sum, body modification is the means by which I conceptualize a site for female writing. Broadly, female writing is that which allows for each individual to write her own unique story, and to develop a new understanding of what it means to create the self, rather than the reification of a predetermined self. Female writing thus becomes a means of understanding women's lived experiences as expressed by and through the dressed body. The experiences of the four women in the study point to two separate interpretations of body modification as female writing. First, by writing on their own

bodies the women challenge the modern (Grosz, 1990), or male (Cixous, 1976), notion of the body which is contained. Instead, the women create a primitive (Grosz, 1990), or female (Cixous, 1976), reading of the body in which the corporeal form is used as a surface on which to explore, represent, and share lived experience, thereby creating a significant form of individual expression on the very surface that is so often contested in contemporary society: the female body. Second, the act of modifying the body bridges the concepts of consumption and creation. Grosz (1990) states that the male body is used as an “exchange-value” (p. 242) suggesting it is merely the site for the consumption of goods. In contrast, the female body provides an outward understanding of the bodily experience, as signs ooze to the surface (Grosz, 1990) through the act of creating meaning via dress practices. Body modification exists in a realm in which it is both consumption and creation, producing a new form of expression that by being self-expression for the masses addresses the idea of female writing.

Summary

In this chapter, I developed a third level of interpretation by theorizing about issues of experience that surfaced within and across the personal narratives of the four modifiers. I began with a discussion of why the modifiers’ experiences of tattooing and body piercing are important to consider within a definition of body modification, and how these experiences link dress and the body. I then explored how body modification can serve as the foundation for understanding self-expression through female writing, and how tattooing and body piercing works as the axis on which this understanding is both produced and experienced. In the next chapter, I reflect on the process of research and

interpretation, and discuss how this study contributes to the existing knowledge of women's lived experience with dress and in turn, provides direction for further research.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this study is to explore the experiences of four women working within the body modification industry in contemporary America. All individuals dress their bodies on a daily basis. This study focuses on the unique position of body modification, in the form of tattooing and body piercing, as dress in contemporary society. As this study has shown, the issues important to understanding women's experiences with tattooing and body piercing provide a unique avenue for the examination of body modification as a site for self-expression through female writing.

The term "body modification" encompasses a broad range of dress practices. As a result, defining body modification in terms of contemporary tattooing and body piercing practices is an important part of understanding the modifier's experiences within the context of a broader industry. Moreover, this dissertation illustrates the social, cultural, and historical contexts through which women's position in contemporary body modification has evolved. Because of the common assumptions made about women's involvement in body modification, tattooing and body piercing have typically been overlooked as tools used by women to express the self. Furthermore, contemporary body modification is often considered a site within which the subjugation of women as objects is played out. Such perceptions ultimately have had implications for how women view their involvement within modification.

In this study, I use an interpretive methodology to explore what it is like to be a woman working in the body modification industry. Specifically by looking at how body modifiers view their modifications as frameworks for expression, through the work they have had done on themselves as well as the work they do on clients. Through this study I have also aimed to understand the factors that contribute to this creative yet consumptive form of self-expression, as well as what these factors mean for understanding body modification as a site for female writing. In this chapter, I reflect on the process used to shape this understanding and focus the discussion around three core ideas: collaboration, construction, and interpretation. In the first section “Collaboration,” I discuss what my original goals and intentions were in conducting this study, and how they were addressed throughout the research process via an on-going dialogue with the participants. In the second section, “Construction,” I explore how I conducted the research, beginning with each of the personal narratives in order to develop to the second and third levels of interpretation. Finally, in the third section, “Interpretation,” I examine the findings of the research and explore the implications of this study for expanding the existing dialogue surrounding the topic of body modification, and then suggest areas in which further research is needed.

Collaboration

The act of body modification often invites discussion, as it is typically an outward display of inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences of individuals who choose to use tattooing and body piercing as a form of dress. The four women in this study are no different, as each was enthusiastic to discuss her personal modifications and the work she

does as a modifier. This eagerness perhaps stems from the lack of opportunity modifiers have to convey their experiences to others, and particularly, to those outside of the body modification industry. However, because this study is in part an examination of the dressed body as lived experience, it is important to consider who ultimately speaks about this understanding within the context of “research.”

Through the construction of personal narratives, I began the interpretation process with the experiences of the modifiers themselves, and explored their perceptions of their own modifications and the role they play in the process of creating modifications for others. I then used these narratives as a foundation for developing the second and third levels of interpretation. During this process I sought a dialogue with the modifiers that continued beyond the fieldwork setting and throughout the process of interpretation. However, during this process I was conscious of the degree to which my own voice shaped the accounts of each woman’s experiences. From developing areas covered in the interviews, to creating a framework for the examination of the study as a whole, my goals for the study have to some extent determined how their voices are represented.

Through the use of an interpretive methodology I developed three distinct levels of interpretation that aimed to clarify who was speaking and when. In addition, I entered into the research field with a specific set of topics I intended to cover with each of the participants. I was aware of the need to remain attentive to the differences among each of the modifiers in terms of what was important to each and the need to create a dialogue within which their perspectives could be explored. In order to do this, remaining flexible

and open to the needs of the participants throughout the research process was important and ensured an environment that fostered an open dialogue between us.

My own goals for this study sometimes conflicted with the modifiers' expectations of the research process. There were concerns, questions, and issues brought up by the women that necessitate further consideration here. For example, during the construction of the personal narratives, the importance of the professional image of the women became important. Many of the modifiers had difficulty with parts of the narratives that suggested a conflict with their conceptualization of how the field, and their place within it, should be represented to the public. Moreover, it became clear to me in the interview process that while each modifier discussed gender relations within the industry, particularly with regard to customers, many felt uncomfortable with questions having to do with the role gender plays in the body modification industry as a whole.

Initially, I sought the modifier's own interpretations of meaning within her work. However, the more I encountered a negative reaction to my questions about the role of gender in the body modification industry, the more I realized the need for flexibility on my part. For example, whenever I asked Amy if she perceived any gender differences, regardless of the context of the question, she would immediately reply, "No, not really," but when further explaining her response she often cited observations that emphasized the importance of gender. This kind of reaction was common among the four women, and could be explained in part by the fact that each of the modifiers felt that highlighting gender would undermine their role as professionals within the field. Although this led to a change in my expectations during the research process, becoming aware of and

accepting their perspective in regards to this matter ultimately validated my representation of their voices within the interpretation.

Because we had worked together on a previous research project, all of the modifiers were familiar with me, as well as with aspects of the research process. In doing a second, similar study, the importance of this past experience surfaced for a number of them. Therefore it is important to note that the degree to which the women felt comfortable with me and my research goals was shaped in part by our previous collaborative experiences.

The interview process was intended to create a conversation between us. As discussed in Chapter Three, I attempted to continue this conversation after the fieldwork portion of this study was completed through written and verbal correspondence, in the form of mail, email, phone conversations, and site visits with each of the participants throughout the months that followed. In doing this, I sought as much participation during the research process from the modifiers as possible, beginning with feedback and clarification about the interview transcripts, to developing the personal narratives, as well as garnering responses to the issues surfacing in the narratives used to shape the second and third levels of interpretation.

During the interpretation process I received varying amounts of feedback, ranging from quite extensive to very little at all, depending on the level of involvement each modifier wanted. It is possible that my status as “researcher” affected the degree to which the modifier felt they could correct my interpretations, despite her familiarity with me. Ultimately, however, I feel this approach was a successful way to include the women

throughout the interpretation process and an effective means for cross-checking my understanding, as it often served to point out the diverse perspectives among us.

The point at which these different perspectives caused misunderstandings, including my own, regarding the research process, bears mentioning. The way by which the modifier was represented was important for all of them. For instance, Jenn was particularly concerned with how her professional reputation would be affected, and expressed hesitation about her work being represented in a negative light. I explained why a thorough understanding of her experiences was important to the research and that we could specifically discuss any areas of her narrative that she was uncomfortable with. I explained that the goal of the process was research, not promotion. In the end, she agreed to the narrative, however chose to maintain her anonymity throughout the remainder of the research process. This particular exchange was informative for a number of reasons. First, it shed light on an important difference regarding expectations of the research between the participants and myself. Many of the women had previously been the subject of interviews, both within and outside of the profession. However, these interviews were conducted in a very different format than the one I used. For example, most of the women had been interviewed for school projects by undergraduates and high school students, and some of the women had also been interviewed by journalists. These interviews often have a particular agenda or argument, whereas my research, in contrast, did not. This led to a degree of tension during the interpretation, and specifically between the images the women sought to project and what was ultimately presented by the narratives.

Jenn's reaction to the representation of her experiences within her personal narrative brought up another issue that requires discussion: that of my own expectations of the overall research process. I had to come to terms with the fact that she might decide to discontinue her involvement in the research because she did not agree with everything in her narrative. Because of this, I had to reconcile my desire to have her continued input throughout the interpretation process with my goal of accurately representing what each modifier expressed during the fieldwork. This situation led me to seriously evaluate my role as researcher, both in terms of how I felt about my relationship with each modifier, and in terms of what I expected out of this relationship.

Similarly, I often found that the modifiers were interested in telling me who they thought should be included in the study. This likely occurred because of the relatively close knit nature of the body modification industry, in that modifiers are often aware of work being done by others in the field. This interest was particularly evident in two ways: my inclusion of tattoo artists and body piercers and the specific modifiers selected to participate in the research process. Although each woman viewed herself as a part of the body modification industry at large, which could include both tattooing and body piercing, many felt the experiences of tattoo artists were different than those of body piercers, and vice versa. For instance, Wendi, a body piercer did not consider herself an "artist" in the same category as "tattoo artists," and admitted that it was through the research process that she began to consider the work she did as a body piercer as artistic in nature. In addition, even though they were aware of the reasons for my study and the rationale I used to select certain artists, some of them nevertheless offered their opinion

as to my selections. While they felt it was important for me to include professionals who had proven themselves, on the other hand, many felt that the participants I selected would illustrate the diversity of women in the industry.

Admittedly, both opinions are valid, in that there are hundreds of women working as tattooists and body piercers in the body modification industry today, and each has unique perspectives that shed light on the experiences of women as modifiers. It is difficult to know what constitutes a successful modifier, in that I found that technique, style, and the creative process were interpreted differently by each woman in the study, suggesting that the notion of what makes for a successful modifier is inherently subjective. However, given that each of the modifiers characterizes the body modification industry by its diversity, the four women in this study do reflect this. In selecting the four women of the study I have illustrated the diversity inherent to the personal and professional experiences of those working in the industry today. Additionally, by focusing on these four women in particular, I have provided a foundation for further exploration into women's use of tattooing and body piercing to dress the body and significance of these practices within contemporary society.

Construction

Each of the four women in the study is a unique individual, as reflected in each personal narrative. However, each is also a part of a larger whole, in that interpreting their experiences as a group sheds light on the way tattooing and body piercing is understood within society as a whole. In order to link their experiences with issues associated with body modification, I looked across the women's narratives for

commonalities among their opinions as to social perceptions of body modification. I asked three questions: What do the modifiers think about their own modifications? What do the modifiers think of others' perceptions of the industry? And, how do they position themselves and their work with respect to such perceptions?

When individuals choose to become heavily modified, they enter into a dialogue with each other and society at large about body modification as a dress act and the meanings it conveys. As discussed in Chapter Five, each woman came to realize her role in the body modification industry as both a modified person and a professional modifier. Although each understands that they are two distinct roles – modified and modifier – the two are often related in the minds of others, especially those outside of the field.

Due in part to the perceptions of society at large, the modifiers find that their choice of involvement with body modification is often a catalyst for dialogue, whether positive or negative, with others. Because of this, some of the participants believe that educating the general public about body modification practices is an important part of the work they do. However, many of them also find that they have become “ambassadors for the industry” (Lacie) at any and all times, instead of when they want to be. Through this study, I hope to have provided a certain amount of support for their efforts, though it may be different than the support they are used to. Because they are all professional modifiers I have deliberately used most of their real names (with their consent) throughout this study, in the hopes that they might gain further visibility for the work they do as modifiers.

Within this study, I explored the ways that gender has implications for each woman's understanding of her place not only as a modified woman in contemporary society, but also as a woman working as a body modifier. Each modifier had to determine how to present herself and her work to customers and to the body modification industry as a whole. Each had to position modification as a creative and/or consumption process and to negotiate her gendered role within this process.

Through the four women's experiences, I illustrated how tattooing and body piercing are forms of self-expression through the co-created process of female writing. Although the modifiers do not necessarily see themselves as marginalized within the body modification industry, they all use their modifications as sites for a degree of expression not achieved through other dress practices. While each acknowledges the marginalized position of women within body modification historically, they all see themselves as equal to men within the industry today.

Their perception of equality highlights my position as a researcher interested in interpreting their experiences as female body modifiers. Given the position of the female bodily experience in contemporary society as a whole, focusing on the gendered natured of the modifier's experience is an attractive prospect. However, forcing such a perspective could result in the further silencing of women's voices and bodily experiences, and would ignore other factors important to their experiences as professionals in the body modification industry. Instead, I sought to incorporate the modifiers' own understandings of their position within the field into my interpretation of their collective experiences.

I presented the modifier's collective experiences through a thematic interpretation to examine their views on how self-expression and consumption shape the body modification industry as a whole. I also explored the ways that their work is defined through the relationships they have with others, both inside and outside of the profession. As a result, the need for further research on the implications of body modification for social negotiation of the dressed body is highlighted. Studies that specifically address perceptions of tattooing and body piercing in contemporary society would be useful in further understanding the reasons for their increased popularity.

Interpretation

A phenomenological inquiry places lived experience, and in this case, that of four women body modifiers, at the foundation of the research process. It also frames a reflective process between the researcher and participant to cultivate an ongoing dialogue between them. In this dissertation, I have shown how an interpretive approach is useful for highlighting the connections between lived experience and dress, specifically contextualizing body modification as both lived experience and dress. By including factors of experience, such as self-expression, within the discourse, I have shown how the modifiers' voices can shape an understanding of body modification and therefore must be central to our explorations of the meanings of such dress practices.

In this study, I focused on the role of the modifier to explore how the process of body modification shapes her lived experience. I used the notion of lived experience to interpret the modification. By situating tattooing and body piercing as forms of both self-expression and consumption, I sought to avoid the social and historical notions typically

associated with body modification practices. Moreover, I attempted to show how the modifiers' themselves experience body modification.

I maintain that a new perspective on body modification must be employed to grasp the depth of meanings attributed to tattooing and body piercing today. As illustrated by their personal narratives, many of the women see their own modifications as a site for self-expression. However, in their role as modifiers, many of them view their work on others as facilitating an act of consumption rather than being a part of the client's own process of self-expression. It is difficult, however, to create an absolute divide between body modification on the self (as self-expression) and body modification on others (as a co-created consumptive act). First, the process of modification is unique to each individual, making it somewhat difficult to generalize or theorize about the experience itself. Second, though the women saw their personal modifications as separate from the work they do as modifiers, they understood it as part of a larger whole. This distinction was less clear within the context of society at large, wherein many participants found that their modifications were "marks of the profession" and thus interpreted by others as expertise in the area. As Wendi explains, "This [body piercing] is what I do, not who I am. I just wish people would realize that."

Indeed, the visibility of the women's own modifications was important to their experience. Although the participants did not necessarily see a direct link between their own choice in modifications and the work they do as modifiers, this link was made by the general population. However, many of the women saw some degree of connection between the two, particularly in terms of the importance of their own modifications being

“good luck,” as they serve to communicate knowledge of the field in a very visible way. Although the quality of their modifications didn’t necessarily equate to their own skill, in their minds it did reflect their ability to recognize successful pieces, which in turn gave them more credibility as modifiers, thereby bridging self-expression and consumption through the process of body modification.

As Grosz (1997) points out, our understanding of bodily experience is gendered because bodies are biologically different, and our experiences are as varied as each individual is unique. A new understanding of bodily expression should therefore be explored, one that counters the forces that keep multiple voices silent. Women’s involvement in body modification is frequently ignored or discussed as a small part of a predominantly male history of tattooing and body piercing practices. Although some scholars have recently sought to articulate a history of modified women (Hardin, 1999; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 2003; Sanders, 1991), in this study, I have found that the position of female modifier is relative. That is, the four women in this study define themselves as much through their own modifications as through their role as modifiers within the industry. This understanding points to the need to further explore the role that women as professionals play in creating meaning associated with the dressed body.

As indicated in their personal narratives, each of the four women has an artistic background and seeks to balance this background with the commercially-driven practice of body modification. Each tries to balance this in a different way, from engaging in freelance art to seeking artistic recognition from other professionals in the field, or by focusing on the uniqueness of a modification for each client and the specific variations of

the client's body. Each seeks to reconcile the practice as artistic with a process that has become overtly commercial. Further research into this tension is needed as it would shed light on how modification helps to shape conceptions of identity, whether personal or professional.

The connection between self-expression and consumption within body modification points to several areas for further study. Because tattooing and body piercing tend to be interpreted differently than other contemporary body modification practices, such as dieting or exercise, this is a particularly fruitful avenue for understanding how the need for self-expression is tempered by consumption-driven goals. In addition, while tattooing and body piercing are often seen as male-dominated dress practices, the tension between self-expression and commodity as played out in body modification is not specific to one gender. Additional research is needed to further explore the concept of creative consumption within dress, as well as the role of gender within the process of creative consumption.

I propose that an effective means to approach the study of body modification is to begin with the experiences of the individuals working in modification, and to seek to understand what is important to them and why. In this study, I used interpretive methods to explore experience and focus on the ways that the four women verbally and visually articulate their identities as modifiers. I then developed a framework to explore their roles as both modifiers and modified, positioning tattooing and body piercing as both self-expression and a consumption-based act, and as a site for female writing.

In conclusion, this study connects the experiences of four modifiers within the context of dress as lived experience. In doing this study, I have shown how these four women experience and shape their worlds through their participation in body modification. As modifiers, they create female writing using tattooing and body piercing, and do so for the purposes of a self-expressive yet consumptive act. Thus, to understand how the four women experience body modification is to embrace a new understanding of body modification itself.

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APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire⁶

Part One: Background

Name: _____

Birth (Maiden) Name: _____

Current Address: _____

Phone/Email: _____

Website: _____

Birth Date: _____

Birth Place: _____

Residence Pattern:

Born in _____ until _____ big, medium, little, village, rural

Moved to _____ until _____ big, medium, little, village, rural

Moved to _____ until _____ big, medium, little, village, rural

Moved to _____ until _____ big, medium, little, village, rural

Birth Order (check one): 1st _____ 2nd _____ 3rd _____ 4th _____ 5th _____ other _____

Sisters:

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

Brothers:

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

First name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

⁶ Parts of this questionnaire are informed by McCracken, 1988, p. 67.

Parents:

Mother's name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

Father's name: _____ present age _____ now lives in _____

Mother's place of birth: _____

Father's place of birth: _____

Occupation of mother: _____

Occupation of father: _____

Education and Occupation:

Occupation: _____

Education: _____

Highest level: _____

Institution name: _____

Emphasis/Major (if any): _____

Marital Status and History:

Marital Status: _____

Children:

Name: _____ age: _____ gender: _____ now living in: _____

Name: _____ age: _____ gender: _____ now living in: _____

Name: _____ age: _____ gender: _____ now living in: _____

Education of Children:

Occupations of Children:

Occupation of Spouse: _____

Religion:

Denomination: _____

How often do you worship: _____

Part Two: Personal Modifications

Please list any modifications you currently have including what they are and when you received them.

Please list any modifications you had in the past, but have removed. Include what they were when you got them, and when they were removed.

Are there any modifications you would like to get in the next 2-3 years?

Part Three: Industry Involvement⁷

Please answer the following questions or provide me with documentation that contains the following information.

List recent workshops or training events you have attended:

List recent conventions or occupational gatherings you have attended:

List any awards received for works completed, and provide a general description of the piece:

List any publications you and/or your work have been featured in, and provide a general description of the piece:

List any publications or awards your place of occupation has received:

⁷ Parts of this questionnaire are informed by Nelson, 1998, p. 381.

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule⁸

1) Personal history:

A) Modifications on self:

- Tell me about when you received your first modification.
- What is your favorite modification? Why?
- What is your least favorite modification? Why?

B) Modifications on others:

- Describe the first time you modified someone else.
- Describe the first time you modified someone else as an apprentice.
- Describe the first time you modified a customer.
- How has your ability as a modifier evolved? What was your training like?
- Do you pursue opportunities for continued training?

2) Inspiration for work:

- Do you seek inspiration for your work? If so, what is it?
- Describe the stages you go through in creating a piece.
- What do you enjoy the most/least about the process of creation in body modification?

⁸ Parts of this interview schedule are informed by Nelson, 1998, p. 381.

- What direction has your work taken over the years, is there a particular style?

What direction might it take in the future?

3) Process of modifying customers:

- How involved are you in the modification choices made by customers?
- Do you think this is related to the sex of the customer?
- Describe how you see your role in the actual modification of a customer.
- Do you think this is related to the sex of the customer?

4) Factors of employment:

- Describe a typical day at work.
- What does your typical weekly schedule look like?
- Describe the internal structure within the shop. Where do you fit in?
- What do you like the most/least about your work environment?

5) Perceptions of your occupation:

- What are your feelings towards your work?
- How would you describe your work?
- Are you concerned with how others (customers, co-workers, family, friends, society) see or interpret your work?
- Do you think being female is important to this interpretation?

6) Factors of identity:

- How do you reconcile expectations of other areas of your life in relation to your work?

- Do you prefer to have a separate space from you home in which you work?
- What interests do you have outside of your work?
- How important is body modification to you? Your identity? Your social roles?

7) Reflecting on the research process:

- How do you feel about participating in this research?
- What about this process made it most valuable to you?
- What, if anything, was revealed to you about yourself or your work during this process?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX C

Consent Forms

Part One: Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: Women and Body Modification: An Exploration of Gender Roles and Relations

Project Director: Kathryn (Brown) Eason

Participant's Name: _____

DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES:

You are invited allow your employee to participate in a study exploring the experiences of women in the body modification industry. The participants were selected as a because of their employment within the field of body modification.

The primary purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of women's experiences in body modification. If you agree to be in this study, the participant will be interviewed concerning your perspectives and experiences, as a woman, in the body modification industry. The interview, to be conducted in the participant's place of employment, will be audio taped and will last approximately 2-3 hours.

You may terminate the interview or audio taping at any time. You may ask any questions you may have about the interview or the study at any time.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

It is anticipated that there are no psychological, physical, or sociological risks involved in participating in this study.

Full confidentiality of the participants will be maintained. Actual names will not be used in any written or published accounts of the research project. Data, including both interview audiotapes and transcripts, will be kept in a locked storage unit in the investigator's office. Data will be disposed of via shredding and the digital audio files will be erased within ten years of the initial date of data collection.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

The benefits of participating in the study include contributing to a greater understanding of women's experiences with body modification. There are no personal benefits gained by participation in the study.

CONSENT:

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you understand the procedures and any risks and benefits involved in this research. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty or prejudice; your participation is entirely voluntary. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant in this project.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board, which insures that research involving people follows federal regulations, has approved the research and this consent form. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project can be answered by calling Mr. Eric Allen at (336) 256-1482. Questions regarding the research itself will be answered by Kathryn (Brown) Eason by calling (704) 701-1726. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the project described to you by Kathryn (Brown) Eason.

Part Two: Additional Informed Consent Form

_____ I agree

_____ I do not agree

to use my name within written accounts of the research project, “Beyond the Tattooed Lady: Exploring Women’s Experiences in the Body Modification Industry.”

_____ I agree

_____ I do not agree

to use the name of my place of employment within written accounts of the research project, “Beyond the Tattooed Lady: Exploring Women’s Experiences in the Body Modification Industry.”

Signature (may be typed if electronic copy):

Date: